

# planting a sense of pride

**Julian Dobson** looks at how the inclusion of green infrastructure within regeneration activity in Birkenhead and Wirral Waters has improved local environments and helped to lay the ground for further investment



McCor Wymne

## Above

Fun for all - children queue up for the climbing wall at a community event in Ilchester Park

After a morning of unseasonal squalls, the sun has broken through at Ilchester Park. Children are gathering in a giant tipi in which African drummers are ramping up the party mood. Others are preparing costumes for a street parade. An avenue of young silver birch trees has been yarn-bombed in bright colours. Below them there are clusters of wild flowers planted by local children.

It might sound like a typical August Bank Holiday community festival in many parts of Britain. But until recently nobody would have imagined doing

this in the North End of Birkenhead. Ilchester Park itself was never considered a park until 2014 – it has only recently been adopted as a park by the local authority. Before that, it was simply a neglected green space in the middle of a windswept housing estate that had seen better days. Ann McLachlan, the local ward councillor and Deputy Leader of Wirral Council, explains how much has changed:

*'Ten years ago, when I became a councillor, [the park] had tenement buildings on it. It had a pub known as the 'Blood Tub' (it was called the New*

*Dock Inn), and the old tenement style courtyard was known as the 'Bull Ring'. It was a rough, tough area. But people from the North End live in the North End, stay in the North End; their families live here.'*

In recent years a series of housing upgrades by Magenta Living, the largest social landlord in the borough, have provided new external cladding and energy-saving improvements. Homes deemed unfit or unsuitable have been demolished. A private developer, Keepmoat, is starting to build homes for sale on the demolition sites. But housing has not been the only change. Ilchester Park is at the heart of The Mersey Forest's Green Streets initiative, a key part of the jigsaw that is the regeneration of the former industrial heart of Birkenhead and the neighbourhoods that served the dock areas.

Green Streets is a programme to plant thousands of trees across neighbourhoods in Merseyside and North Cheshire, funded through a range of agencies, including the Forestry Commission's Setting the Scene for Growth programme, the INTERREG ForeStClim project, and the Government's Local Sustainable Transport Fund, as well as the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills and the Big Tree Plant. In the Wirral, it dovetails with long-term plans to improve the green infrastructure and enhance biodiversity around



McCoy Wynne

#### **Above**

A greener scene – tree planting by The Mersey Forest at Egerton Dock, Birkenhead

Wirral Waters, one of Britain's biggest development sites, based on the former Birkenhead docks (and an Enterprise Zone, signalling that it is a Government priority project). Already more than 1,200 trees have been planted, greening more than 12 kilometres of streets.

The creation of Ilchester Park out of a boggy and neglected triangle has been one of the most noticeable changes. As well as the avenue of silver birches, other trees have been planted to provide shade and variety, and new natural play equipment

is being introduced to attract children and families. The Veolia Environmental Trust has contributed £67,000 through the Landfill Communities Fund to construct natural play areas and a network of new paths.

'The community have got wide open green space for their children to play in, for them to breathe in really, rather than them being in an overcrowded environment,' Ann McLachlan says. 'Physically there's a big difference, but it's raised aspiration in the community as well about a better quality of life. I think local people feel a garden's been brought to them. Where people have no gardens, they feel the greening of their community is a welcome addition to their life.'

Anna Barnish, Manager of North Birkenhead Development Trust, the main community organisation for the area, sees the greening of local streets and the revitalisation of the park as part of a long-term change in the fortunes of one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK:

*'In spring when the trees are in blossom it looks lovely, and people comment on how uplifting it is to walk down a street which is lined with trees in full blossom. If you look at the trees, there's been very little damage to them, which shows the impact that the process of education and engagement has had.'*

That engagement has been secured through close partnerships between Mersey Forest staff and community organisations to involve local people in choosing which trees are planted where, building a sense of ownership of the greening of the wider area. North Birkenhead Development Trust is now supporting plans to set up a friends' group to plan events and activities and help care for Ilchester Park.

'There are people that genuinely enjoy living here and using the space and want to see it develop,' Anna Barnish says. 'It's a very up and coming area – there is the new Keepmoat housing development, and Wirral Borough Council are doing loads and loads to encourage positive development, with new shops in the area. The fact that there's new private development in housebuilding says a lot. It says that people want to live here.'

#### **Prouder neighbourhoods**

Frank Field, the local MP, is a strong advocate of The Mersey Forest's work in greening North Birkenhead and the key routes into the centre of the town and the Wirral Waters development sites. For him, the key is to link the physical and visual enhancement of the neighbourhood with job opportunities that will help to address the entrenched deprivation of the area.

He is particularly excited about the prospects for new automotive- and energy-based industries on the nearby site of the former Mobil oil plant, which



### Above

Leap of faith – children enjoy the new facilities at Ilchester Park

could bring up to 1,000 jobs to North Birkenhead. 'For once, instead of losing jobs that site will gain jobs. It's been a long time but that will be hugely important,' he says. 'This is a real turning point because before they [the local residents] talked about yesteryear. Now they've got something to say about how the future's going to develop, and you can physically see it happening.'

That sense of growing civic pride is underscored by The Mersey Forest's research examining the attitudes and views of local people. A baseline survey conducted at the beginning of the Green Streets project found that only a fifth of local people rated the appearance of their streets as 'good'. While the sense of community and neighbourliness was strong, nearly half would move away if they had the opportunity. But nearly two-thirds of those surveyed said they would spend more time outdoors if there were more trees on the streets, and almost three-quarters said a Green Streets project would benefit the area.

After the Green Streets project had begun, a 'Picnic in the Park' event in Ilchester Park in June 2013 gave residents the opportunity to offer their views on how they thought the area was changing. Their comments confirmed a growing sense of optimism: *'The area has always been poor, with high unemployment. The planting recognises it as a viable place to grow up and live.'*

*'It softens the urban landscape and makes it look much less stark and barren.'*

One of the main areas of tree planting in 2014 has been the Connaught Estate, where Magenta Living has been running a major housing improvement scheme. Steve Jackson, Magenta Living's Contracts Manager, says there was previously little sense of pride and a high turnover of tenants on the estate. Although the trees are still new, he comments that residents have been positive about the improvements and that fears of vandalism have proved unfounded. 'The impact will be in 5, 10, 15 or 20 years; it's planting for the future, and I think that the positive feedback will come in 10 or 20 years or more,' he adds.

The Mersey Forest's own research suggests a more immediate impact, too. Two-thirds of residents surveyed at the start of the planting programme said that tree planting would improve the area, and a quarter said that a tree-lined route would encourage them to walk or cycle to work.

### A scene for investment

Frank Field's emphasis on linking neighbourhood improvements to better job opportunities reflects a key theme of the Green Streets initiative and of the wider programme to plant trees and improve green infrastructure across Birkenhead and the Wirral Waters sites.

The ambition of Wirral Waters is huge: 20,000 new jobs and 14,000 new homes over a 30-year period. Frank Field, The Mersey Forest and developers Peel Holdings share a common desire to help bring this vision to life by making the area more physically



#### Above

Engineering a future – Steve Atkinson, design engineer at Birkenhead firm Heap and Partners, prepares a giant valve for testing. The photo, by Len Grant, was part of an exhibition linking The Mersey Forest's tree-planting programme with the varieties of work done in Birkenhead

attractive, creating a sense of pride and positive activity.

The investment in greening the area has already been substantial. It includes £2.7 million through the Forestry Commission's Newlands programme to create a community park at Bidston Moss; another £1.4 million secured via the Newlands scheme to fund tree-planting; and additional funding for green infrastructure through section 106 planning agreements for development sites.

For The Mersey Forest, there are clear environmental and climate benefits, creating a more resilient and sustainable area. For the local community, there are benefits in terms of physical improvements and, further down the line, job opportunities. For Peel, the benefits are that the Wirral becomes more attractive to commercial investors.

Already there are signs of activity, although the biggest investor so far is a public body: Wirral Metropolitan College is opening a new campus within the Wirral Waters boundary. The £11.5 million investment (delivered by Peel, which is putting in £3 million of equity) is expected to support 50 jobs and serve 1,000 students. Work began in autumn 2014, with an ambitious goal of opening for the

first students in September 2015. Remediation work on the site has been funded through a £2.5 million loan to Peel from the Homes and Communities Agency. The college has already launched horticulture courses that tie in with the Green Streets initiative, and will play a major role in teaching construction skills to local residents, putting them in a position to apply for the jobs that are likely to be generated as development in and around Wirral Waters takes off.

Richard Mawdsley, Projects Director at Peel Holdings, is adamant that those jobs should benefit local residents:

*'If we don't allow local people to benefit from the opportunities of Wirral Waters then we will have failed. So I think making sure that the demand side of the job opportunities and the supply of skills are married up is really essential. How do you create demand for 15 million square feet of floorspace out of nothing? That's the fundamental issue that we've got. And confidence is a big thing, so how do we generate confidence? It's by demonstrating that things are happening.*

*'So site preparation demonstrates that things are happening; creating some small building projects like the college demonstrates things*

*are happening; investing in energy centres demonstrates things are happening – and also the trees: that's an early intervention to demonstrate that things are happening around Wirral Waters.'*

He draws inspiration from projects like the development of Hammarby Sjöstad in Stockholm, a new community with a strong emphasis on green infrastructure; the revived network of parks and green spaces that has helped to put Chicago back on the map; and the hugely popular High Line linear park in New York. Yet he recognises that he still has to overcome scepticism within the development industry, because it is difficult to generate quantitative measures of the value of green infrastructure and the health and social benefits it brings:

*'Some might say we're a hard-nosed commercial organisation; it's about how much money we're going to be putting in and how much money we're going to get out. If we invest x million pounds in trees and green infrastructure, what does it do? How do I explain that to my finance director? Where do I get my return on that investment? So therefore the key for me is looking at place-making regeneration precedents and where values and rents have escalated the highest, and what sort of components – including trees and green infrastructure – have enabled that to happen.'*

But like his counterparts at The Mersey Forest and among the local community, he recognises that the returns are long term. However, there are some more immediate illustrations of the value of the tree planting: Chinese visitors have been impressed that the planting schemes include ginkgo trees, the national tree of China. 'We've always said that this is a 30-year project, a 30-year delivery project which is jobs driven; it's all about jobs,' Richard Mawdsley says. 'It's not housing led, it's not retail led; it's all about diversifying the economy and growing the economy.'

That emphasis on jobs as well as on the quality of life is a thread that is becoming increasingly visible. A recent exhibition by the photographer Len Grant, commissioned by The Mersey Forest, visually linked the variety of work done by people in the area with the tree planting scheme and marked the 170th anniversary of the laying of the foundation stone for Birkenhead Docks in 1844. There may still be work to do to demonstrate the link between trees and work to economists and civil servants, but the connection and the pride it generates shines out from the faces in Len Grant's portraits.

● **Julian Dobson** is Director of Urban Pollinators Ltd. The views expressed are personal.