

Tees Heritage Park

Green Infrastructure Case Study

Reconnecting communities with their heritage and each other

NATURAL
ENGLAND

Conceived as a way to bring about the renaissance of the River Tees, Tees Heritage Park has restored the area's identity and provided a unique amenity for today's Tees Valley community. By connecting and promoting the existing green space as a single park, this visionary project has succeeded in reconnecting local people to the river that they had once turned their back on.

Snapshot

- **Enhancements to the river corridor have made it more accessible to adjacent communities in Ingleby Barwick, Thornaby, Bowesfield, Yarm and Eaglescliffe**
- **Formally defining the park – it is now recognised in the Tees Valley Green Infrastructure Strategy – has made it easier to protect areas such as the River Leven corridor for wildlife**
- **Site visits with local schools resulted in pupils producing a large number of sculptures that inspired the on-site artworks**
- **QR (Quick Response) code technology enables visitors to download information about the local wildlife and heritage of the River Tees**



Mouth of the River Leven, a tributary of the River Tees

Key facts:

- Size of phase one of Tees Heritage Park: 101 ha (250 acres)
- Total size of Tees Heritage Park when complete: 809 ha (2,000 acres)
- Distance of new or realigned access routes to and through the park created to date: 4km
- Total cost of phase one of Tees Heritage Park: £614,500
- Key partners for Tees Heritage Park include Groundwork North East, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, Environment Agency, the Canal & River Trust, Tees Valley Wildlife Trust, Natural England and Teesside City Learning Centre

Key environmental functions:

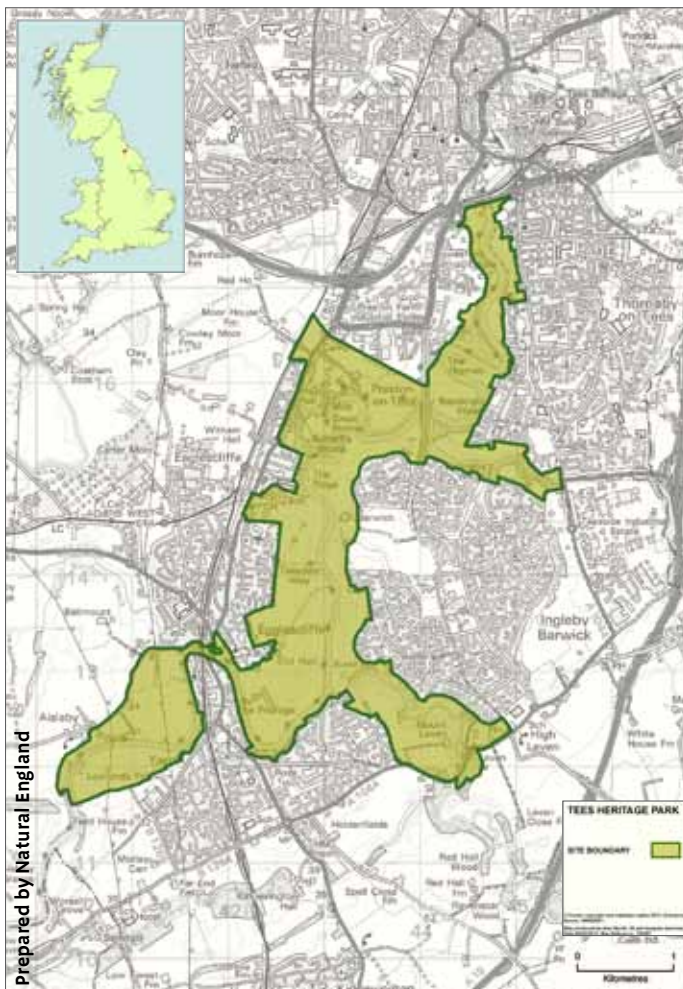
- Enhancing the river corridor
- Promoting opportunities for recreation
- Supporting physical and mental health and wellbeing
- Improving links between communities
- Increasing the appreciation and understanding of the value of public space and environmental issues
- Enhancing flood-water management to protect surrounding homes and businesses

Introduction

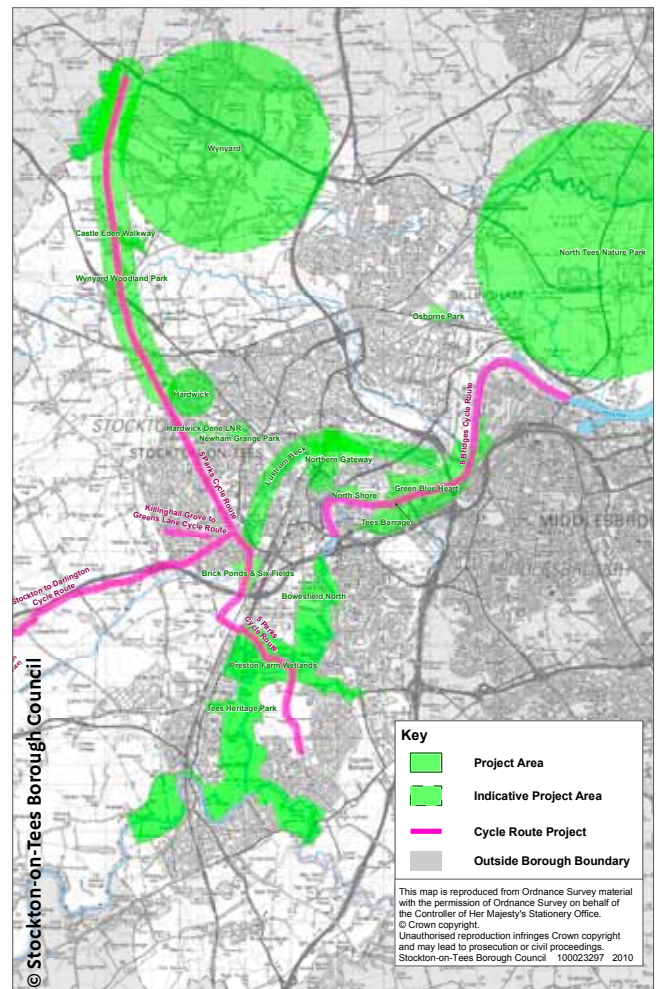
The Tees Heritage Park stretches from Yarm to Stockton in the Tees Valley, taking in all of the open land along the River Tees including the Leven Valley and Bassleton Beck. For the first time, this attractive stretch of green space in the heart of Tees Valley now has a clear identity and formal planning designation so that it can be promoted as a single 'park'. Created through a partnership between Friends of Tees Heritage Park, Groundwork North East, Environment Agency, the Canal & River Trust, Natural England, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council and Tees Valley Wildlife Trust, the park officially opened in September 2012 with the completion of the first phase of the project.

Originally a thriving rural community based around the busy market towns and ports of Yarm and Stockton, the character and economy of the lower Tees Valley was transformed by the iron, steel and chemical industries. But despite this transformation, the River Tees remained the common thread around which the communities grew and thrived, and it was only with the demise of river-based industry that it lost its unifying power and communities turned their back on the river.

People started to see the river corridor as an unpleasant place and this only got worse as it became a dumping ground for rubbish. Land was developed on a piecemeal basis with limited interaction between sites under different ownership and footpaths were created with little consideration given to wider connectivity. Even more recent developments were built with their back to the river, further segregating communities from this valuable environmental asset. Some of these communities are classified among the worst performing areas on the Index of Multiple Deprivation, which provides a relative measure of deprivation between areas in England in terms of factors such as income, employment, health, education, housing and crime.



Map showing the location and boundary of Tees Heritage Park (indicative Only)



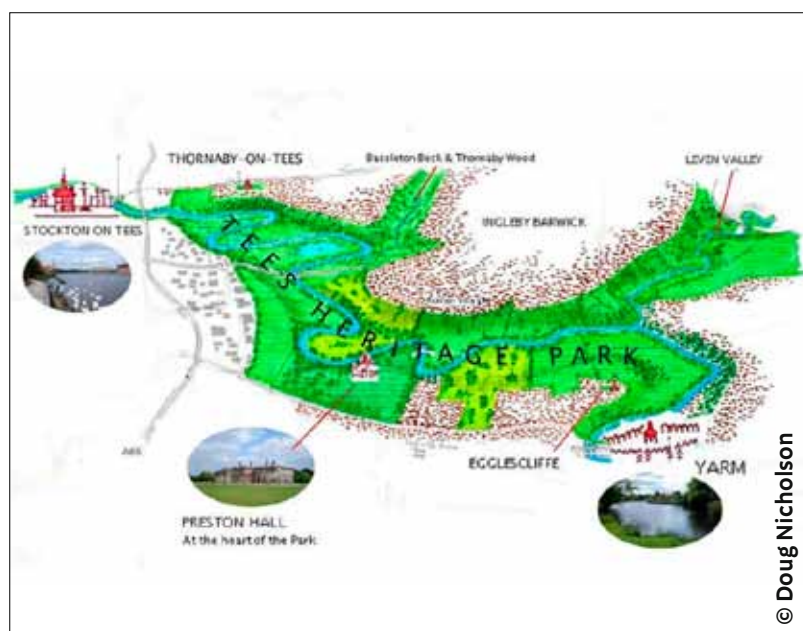
Green Infrastructure Strategy Action Plan Priorities 2010-2013 shows how Tees Heritage Park will be connected to a wider network of green infrastructure (Indicative Only)

Communities that had once turned their back on the valley were beginning to rediscover its original beauty and allure. The Friends of Tees Heritage Park, which formed in 2007, conceived Tees Heritage Park as a way to bring about a renaissance of the river valley, celebrate its heritage and provide a unique amenity for today's Tees Valley communities. The park is now identified as a major strategic initiative in the Tees Valley Green Infrastructure Strategy. Among the strategy's goals for 2021 is to "develop a network of green corridors and green spaces that enhance the quality of place for existing and future communities and investors" and "create and extend opportunities for access, regeneration and enhancements of biodiversity".

The strategy recognises that the 'corridor concept' fits well with the physical structure of much of the Tees Valley sub-region. It also identifies the River Tees as a strategic wildlife corridor that provides a major route through the urban area and into the surrounding countryside, with opportunities to increase accessibility to local residents. Tees Heritage Park is featured in the Stockton-on-Tees Green Infrastructure Strategy and recognised in the Local Development Framework. It is also a key consideration in both Regeneration and Environment Local Development Document and Sustainable Development Supplementary Planning Documents.

Enhancing the river corridor to create a landscape for people and wildlife

As a result of its work with the local community, the Friends of Tees Heritage, with support from Groundwork North East, was successful in securing £450,000 funding through a Community Spaces Flagship application. This was combined with £154,500 from Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council, the landowner, and £10,000 from Natural England which provided the funding for Groundwork North East to carry out work on the first 101 ha of the project. As part of the funding criteria for Community Spaces, the Council has also entered into an agreement that ensures that all physical works are managed and maintained for a minimum of 20 years.



Illustrative map showing the various sites brought together as Tees Heritage Park

In creating Tees Heritage Park, the aim was to ensure that high-quality green space within the River Tees corridor in Stockton was enhanced by connecting it to adjacent sites. This was achieved by making Preston Farm and Bowesfield Nature Reserve, which are managed by the Tees Valley Wildlife Trust, more accessible to the local communities of Ingleby Barwick, Thornaby, Bowesfield, Yarm and Egglecliffe. Development of the park as a whole will also provide greater connectivity to adjacent attractions including Preston Hall and Park, and Saltholme Wildlife and Discovery Park, encouraging longer visitor stays to the area.

As well as providing local people with opportunities for recreation and improved health and wellbeing, formalising Tees Heritage Park as an entity has also made it easier to protect areas within the park for wildlife, such as the nature reserve at Bowesfield and Preston Farm. Created between 2009 and 2011 by the Tees Valley Wildlife Trust with support from the Environment Agency and Natural England, the nature reserve aimed to compensate for the loss of wetland habitats at the Tees Estuary due to sea-level rise and coastal squeeze, and preserve the floodplain's ability to receive water from the River Tees, which helps to protect vulnerable land in Stockton in the event of flooding. This included wetland excavations and the planting of 7 ha of native trees under the Forestry Commission's Woodland Grant Scheme.

Surveys undertaken throughout the creation and establishment period of the reserve revealed just how important it is for birds in the Tees Valley. Significant numbers were recorded for teal, gadwall, curlew, shoveler, ruff and golden plover. This indicates a strong relationship between the number of birds using Bowesfield and Preston Farm, and the numbers in Teesmouth Special Protection Area. Milder winters have increased the period in which the upriver wetlands at the nature reserve can be of value to these water birds and may become more important as sea-level rise threatens the intertidal bird feeding grounds in the estuary.

The River Leven corridor – a steeply sided, but well-wooded valley with limited public access – has also benefited from the Tees Heritage Park project. These riverbank woodlands are particularly important because the highly agricultural nature of the Tees Lowlands means that semi-natural woodland is not widespread. To date, 2,000 additional trees have been planted to complement the semi-ancient woodland within Thornaby and Bassleton Woods and 4km of new access routes have been created.

Through its Access to Nature funding scheme, Natural England has been supporting two community rangers for three and a half years to engage with local community groups in the borough in order to understand the barriers to participation and advise where access improvements are needed. The rangers have also been providing opportunities for local people to learn conservation skills and individual work placements have been made available through the Future Jobs Fund.

Reawakening the area's heritage through community engagement



Artwork created by local school children helped to inspire the park's landmark features

The 101 ha of the first phase of Tees Heritage Park were delivered through a wide range of innovative, community-based projects. This included a series of six new, artist-designed landmark features by environmental artists Keith Barrett and Linda Watson to define the boundaries of the park, interpret the area's heritage and create a sense of place. Workshops and site visits held with local schools resulted in a large number of sculptures that inspired the artists in developing detailed designs of the artworks and rest areas. Exhibitions held in each of the towns bordering the park helped further develop the sense of ownership by the local community.



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Landscape artwork located at The Holmes, Thornaby Woods

The sculptures mark historic sites including Black Bobbies' Field, Bassleton Beck and Thornaby Wood. A landscape artwork has been created at Black Bobbies' Field, which is situated close to what was once a medieval village founded by the Normans at Thornaby Green. It provides a rest area and viewpoint adjoining a local nature reserve. At Bassleton Beck, the gateway marks the entrance to the Bassleton Beck Valley, Thornaby Wood and Ingleby Barwick. Thornaby Wood is a large area of ancient woodland with trees such as oak, elm and witch hazel. Roe deer are often seen in the woods. In the upper part of the valley runs an ancient stone path, which may once have been the route via which grain was transported from windmills to barges on the river.

A range of innovative approaches and new technologies are being used to tell the story of the park, its wildlife, history and landscapes. For example, two schools are hosting camera links to a bird box within the park in order to record nesting activity. Further opportunities for education can be found at the 10 artist designed cast metal signal posts at the main entrance and exit points, which incorporate QR code technology enabling visitors to instantly download information about the wildlife and heritage of the immediate location.



© Nicola Bell

Signal post incorporating QR code technology

It is anticipated that the area will become increasingly self-policing against anti-social behaviour as connectivity and participation increases between the sites in the park. A network of new and improved pathways between Ingleby Barwick and Preston Hall, including a multi-use track as part of Sustrans Connect 2 initiative, has already been implemented. Limited access to the river through the golf course at Ingleby Barwick, which had previously been blocked due to the fear of anti-social behaviour, has now been agreed. This change is representative of a shift in perception and positive interaction between the Friends of Tees Heritage Park and local businesses. Meanwhile, the official launch event of the Park in September 2012 is being followed by a year-long events programme supported by a Sustainability Grant and the Big Lottery's Supporting Change and Impact funding. It is hoped that this will continue to ensure community participation in the park for years to come.

Strong relationships are at the heart of the long-term future of the park

The creation of the Tees Heritage Park complements activities at adjacent sites including the creation of additional wetland habitat at Preston Farm Nature Reserve and project proposals within Lustrum Beck corridor - a major tributary of the River Tees that joins the River Tees at Stockton. Projects include the creation of water vole habitats by Tees Valley Wildlife Trust and the recently completed first phase of the Brick Ponds and Six Fields project funded by the Environment Agency, Natural England and Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council. Another long-term aim of this project is to develop an off-road cycle and walk way from Wynard Woodland Park to Yarm. Each section will be specified to meet local landscape characteristics and may include additional pedestrian river crossings.

An essential ingredient in Tees Heritage Park's overall success is its interrelationship with the increasing use of the river itself. As a result, Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council established the River Users Group, which not only includes all key partners and stakeholders but council representatives from multiple departments including sustainable transport, marketing and communications, countryside and green space, and Care for Your Area, which hosts the park's ranger service and Rights of Way officer. The advantage of this multidisciplinary approach is that it ensures all relevant parties are in agreement as to the works to be undertaken and that they are of a standard that is adoptable by the local authority once completed. In this way, the long-term aspirations for Tees Heritage Park are integrated into decisions about the way the river is used in the future.

For further information

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