



particular news

Issue number 4

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The first draft of our big book *England In Particular* was delivered to Hodder and Stoughton in February. Over the next year we shall no doubt see it a few times as the production process moves forward to publication in spring 2006. Details of progress will be posted on the website: www.England-in-particular.info.

Thank you to everyone who has been so generous in sending us information. It has been invaluable and we are delighted to have made new friends. Please do keep in touch: we shall be moving forward with more campaign work on local distinctiveness.

ABCs

The particularity of places is being captured locally in ABC posters - helping people to see their place through each others' eyes and engage in changing things for the better. Here are a few examples.

Copies of our coloured, folded A3 leaflet are available, full of ideas and examples of how to go about preparing an ABC. It can take a social evening or weeks of research, art work, photography. The important thing is to share your thoughts and knowledge of the richness of your place from street to town.

Pontefract Castle

Pontefract, in Yorkshire, already has an ABC, a book developed in a community exercise led by a local heritage writer, ex-miner and ex-

As easy as ...



WEA teacher, Brian Lewis. Called 'A People's History of Pontefract', this is an ABC of Pontefract residents and people with Pontefract connections past and present. It deliberately mixes nationally known and local figures from Edward II to Jeremy Hirst, bull-rider and eccentric, each being given alternate entries in the book. It gives a real and vital impression of the people and the place.

At Pontefract Castle, English Heritage is involved in the preparation of a Conservation Plan. This, one of the most important royal castles in England, has many problems, and it has become visually separated from the town by self-seeding trees. It had a vibrant life in the nineteenth century as rhubarb and liquorice farm and public park, full of plants, paths and people. Sadly, in the mid-twentieth century its life and meaning ebbed away as it was increasingly seen as a municipal burden managed by people far removed from the community. With the Conservation Plan, the ABC and a host of other

local schemes the castle will again be used whilst the Plan itself will become part of supplementary planning guidance.

Neil Redfern, Inspector of Ancient Monuments for West Yorkshire, explains, "Quite often a Conservation Plan contains ranking of values: international, national, regional, local. In the Pontefract plan those rankings are being rewritten to elevate the local. Open consultation meetings are held in the town and we have taken the opportunity (unusual for English Heritage) to say 'I do not live here, you have to tell me what is important about Pontefract' or 'I cannot tell you how to feel about Pontefract, you have to tell me', and once the initial shock has subsided the audience is more than willing to tell us what they think".

It is hoped that these consultations will result in the production of a document which the public feel they can own and guide their use of the place.

Neil concludes, "We realise that there is a considerable tide of past experience to turn back before people accept us as enablers rather than policemen, but the promotion, encouragement and above all legitimisation of community initiative is in our view the only thing that can make monuments sustainable and we are grateful for the advice and support of Common Ground. The ABC fold-out of local distinctiveness has been invaluable, and in our short experience of promoting it, it has captured the imagination more than any other tool".



Joanna Haxby writes: Steart is a hamlet of 13 dwellings on the north coast of Somerset at the far end of a peninsula formed where the River Parrett which drains the Somerset Levels meets the Severn Estuary.

It is a remote and special place; the road a dead end. The highest point is some 8 metres above sea level. As may be clear from this description, it is vulnerable to flooding from both the sea and river.

The Steart Residents' Group was formed at a time when the Environment Agency was reviewing its flood defence strategy for this stretch of coast. One possibility was to abandon the defences of the peninsula in its entirety. Naturally, there was a series of meetings and emotions were running high.

The strength of feeling – anger and anxiety mixed – had its roots in the residents' deep love of the area. Rather than continually experiencing these strong feelings in the context of potential loss, the idea of 'Celebrating Steart' as an

A Steart ABC (towards a sense of place)

by Joanna Haxby

A is for Adders; they bask in the sun.
 B: Blackberries, Bruford's; we've barely begun.
 C: Cox's and Collard's, Chickens and Church, Channel View and the Common – so much to research.
 D stands for Dowell's (the warden's abode), for E we have only the End of the road.
 F: Ferrices, Fishing, and Farming and Floods;
 G: Grass snakes and Gulls; and Goats chewing their cuds.
 H for the bird Hide, and Holms, Steep and Flat, and also for Hinkley – we can't forget that.
 I: Inspiration to paint and to write,
 J: Jubilee, which we are marking tonight.
 K for the Kestrel which hovers in flight,
 L, not for elvers, but Landscape, and Light, (and also for Little owls, shrieking at night).
 M: Manor Farm, Myrtle Cottage, and more;
 N for the Nature reserve on the shore.
 O: Otterhampton, the parish we're in;
 P: Peninsula, Parrett, and wild Peregrine.
 Q for the Quadrant, and, of course, Quantock View;
 R for the Rhynes, of which, more than a few.
 S: Salterns and Saltings, Sloworms and Sheep, Spartina; and Shelduck, which come here to sleep.
 T for the Tides that come in twice a day, and U for the Undertow, pulling away.
 V for the Views: we see Wales with ease.
 W must be Wind – sculpting hedges and trees.
 eXmoor stands high at one end of the bay.
 Y for the Yachts. Are they sailing today?
 I can't think of anything starting with Z,
 So maybe, I'll finish at Y, then, instead!

which made sense? The solution was our ABC a ring binder with a series of A4 plastic pockets each letter introduced by a decorated capital provided by our resident artist. Thus, 'A' held an aerial photograph of the house and garden at No. 18 Steart Bay. 'B' comprised photographs of one resident's mother sitting on the bonnet of a bus in the hamlet in 1933, and of the interior and exterior of the now-defunct Bethel Congregational Chapel. And so on, to 'Z'. As an organising principle it was both simple and flexible.

The impetus to complete the ABC was provided by our commitment to display it at the celebrations hosted in the hamlet by English Nature to mark the Fiftieth anniversary of Bridgwater Bay's designation as a National Nature Reserve and to which all residents were invited amongst other guests. It has introduced us to links with local historians and sources of information. Will it ever end?

Well, discussions of flood defence schemes continue ...

'Celebrating Steart' became a banner under which we could share our feelings about the area in a positive way. We could record our knowledge of the history of our homes, the land and those who had worked and shaped it, and of the landscape its rich wildlife and distinctive built features; and share our personal stories of life in Steart, and the meaning which this place held for each of us.

If the worst happened, something would remain. Our community would not be obliterated.

The material poured in. Older residents contributed their memories in oral history form; there were also written recollections, photographs, poems, old documents, licences, sale particulars, newspaper cuttings, and paintings. How could we organise it, incorporating everything, but in a way

Somerset County Council is an example of a local authority which has adopted the idea as a means of promoting its area. A big pictorial poster runs from A to Z.



alternative was born. Another spur to action was a BBC radio programme in which an Italian gentleman spoke of his experience of losing his home and community to the construction of a reservoir.

Cawood

English Heritage Yorkshire Region is involved in a number of community heritage projects. They believe it to be essential that every effort is made to understand the multiplicity of values attached to a 'place' - not just those values imported by the heritage experts. Keith Emerick, Inspector of



Ancient Monuments for North Yorkshire, writes: "Our aim is to get a better understanding of ideas of 'value' and 'meaning'." At Cawood, near Selby, English Heritage successfully encouraged residents to prepare ABCs. Cawood is a large village with two major medieval Scheduled Monuments, large open areas of grass, earthworks, old orchards and fishponds. One of the spaces – Cawood Garth – was purchased by the village for use by the community.

However, as Keith says "previous approaches to the management of Scheduled Monuments were loathe to accept change or the use of such places, and there was thus a curious mix of something being considered 'nationally important', being managed for the 'public good', but the public were excluded."

This approach is beginning to change, and more frequently the dominant factor is participation. At Cawood it was suggested that residents write their own Conservation Plan for the Garth, rather than have it prepared by external consultants, and residents threw themselves into its preparation.

"The Plan has now become about the village rather than just the Garth – which, as far as we are concerned, means that the Garth has a real, living context. As we hoped, some fabulous stories have emerged: a live beluga whale turned up in the river one year; another year two porpoises appeared in the river and stayed for Christmas; Cawood was the setting for one of the biggest meals ever served in England with several hundred cooks brought in by the Percy's for one celebratory meal in the Middle Ages."

The ABC proved a good way of getting people to talk about those things in the village that were



Buckland Dinham's ABC (Somerset) was assembled and drawn by artist Jude Harris

important to them, different ones being produced by adults and primary school children.

"The Conservation Plan and the ABC work well together because the ABC provides the local significance, but it also illustrates how significance is always changing which will make it easier to adapt the Conservation Plan when that is ready for renewal.

The outcome of all this work is that the community has a document that they own and which can guide their use of their place."

Attleborough

In August 2004 the following announcement appeared in the Attleborough Area Partnership Members' News Sheet (Norfolk):

Do you know what these words mean? Bishy Barny Bee, Mawther, Doderman, Mardlin, Dwile flunking, Boiy, Hang you on, Squit, Ha you got a lite, Loke,

Shink so, Corn Dicky, Duzzy Fool, Bread and Pullit?

On a Thursday in July, 55 local residents had come together at St Mary's Church in the village to share photographs, recipes, ghost stories and reminiscences.

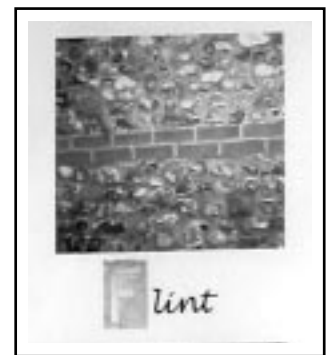
The evening was hosted by the village's Area Partnership and run by Action for Market Towns, the Countryside Agency and Breckland Council. Sally Williams spoke on local distinctiveness, and helped people capture what is special to them about Attleborough. Partnership Chairman Keith Milburn felt the evening to have been a great success, enjoyed by all, "I was surprised at how much local knowledge was contained within the room. Young and old shared their stories, words and view of their town."

The evening's work will be gathered into an ABC poster to promote the area.

Doddington

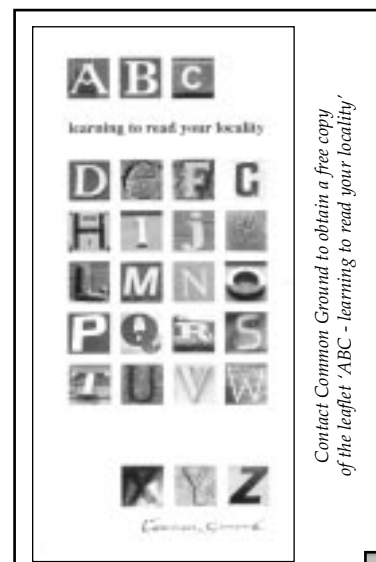
Frances Fielding worked with a primary school in Doddington, Kent, where school pupils mapped out the area and created an ABC. The idea was to help them understand and value their place.

The ABC features many aspects of village life from lanterns to 'phone boxes, tiles and flints to archways and undergrowth.



The class also sent round a questionnaire to local residents asking them about the history of the place and their hopes for the future.

The school will produce an ABC tea towel as well as exploring possible physical improvements that the pupils have identified.



A

The Bicester A-Z is part of Art at the Centre, a public art initiative launched by Arts Council England in 2000 with the aim of giving the arts a greater role in urban communities. Bicester, a rapidly expanding market town in North Oxfordshire, was chosen to be part of the initiative, and the local project gained further funding and practical help from the Town Council and Cherwell District Council.

Artist Gordon Young was commissioned to design public artwork for Bicester town square to help regain its importance as the town's social hub. Input from the community was vital in creating a relevant design and Gordon suggested the idea of creating an ABC as a way of collecting information about Bicester's local distinctiveness and the idea was welcomed.

Gordon feels that "Common Ground identified a methodology that we have all learnt knee high, A B C D . . . Everybody understands the structure, that can become a template for the built environment". Stands at local



events and a local ABC leaflet asking for feedback ensured lots of entries, and Gordon received ABCs created by families and local groups.

He was astounded by the richness of the comments and felt it was important to use as many as possible, referring to transient events such as "Kissed Amy outside the Football Centre" as well as more concrete aspects of the place such as the animals' cemetery at the Garth: Addison; Gipsy; King William; Jill; Queen Eleanor; Snip; Princess Mary; Watchman; Lady Betty; Harold etc all buried there" and the "Bure feeds the Langford,

the Langford feeds the Ray, the Ray feeds the Cherwell, the Cherwell feeds the Thames"

Gordon found an old book in a charity shop and decided to stencil in entries as they arrived, one after another. There is a real momentum to the writing with events, places and names flashing past. At a packed evening in the library the book was ceremonially handed to the mayor for permanent display, and parts of the book were read aloud, the evening becoming quite an event.



The A-Z is a manual to inform Gordon's design for the square. He will quote directly onto paving stones, brickwork, seating, in materials of local significance to Bicester. X will mark the spot where the Christmas tree stands, also the centrepiece to the annual carol singing evening. Gordon's plans have been put on hold while technical problems with road works are sorted out, and it may be some time before the work is realised. But in the meantime the ABC continues on a website set up by the District and Town Councils at www.a-zbicester.co.uk.

Particular News and www.england-in-particular.info are produced by

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Contact us for previous copies of this newsletter, or download them as PDF files from our web-site.

Common Ground is recognised for playing a unique role in the arts and environmental fields, distinguished by the linking of nature with culture, focussing upon the positive investment people can make in their own localities, championing popular involvement, and by inspiring celebration as a starting point for action to improve the quality of our everyday places. We offer ideas, information and inspiration through publications and projects such as Apple Day, Field Days, Parish Maps, local Flora Britannica, Community Orchards and the campaign for Local Distinctiveness. We are grateful for the support of Defra: Environmental Action Fund, the Tedworth Trust, the Cobb Trust, the Headley Trust, the Garfield Weston Foundation and the Lyndhurst Settlement. Charity no. 326335.

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