

Telford: a forest town

Reflections of leaves shifting in the breeze are caught in the gleaming mirrored panels of Darby House, Telford's council offices. It's an image that vividly captures a defining characteristic of the town, at once a forest town and a high-tech commercial centre.

Six million trees and 10 million shrubs were planted as Telford developed in the 1970s. Thirty years on, you can barely see the town for trees. But the planted woods are only a part of Telford's green and wild landscape. Two hundred and fifty years of mining for coal, clay, ironstone and limestone left their mark in an extensive series of pitmounds, rising like sand dunes on the coast from their flat surroundings.

In the town centre they are mown and manicured to standard municipal neatness; in playgrounds they provide the perfect place for children's slides; wander deeper into the Town Park or Granville Country Park and the mounds are clothed in a variety of vegetation, depending on the kind of minerals spewed up from the earth through mining. Once grim, dark heaps of spoil, these relics of old industry transformed over time into some of the best wildlife habitats in the region. Oak woodland sprung up on some; others grew into heathland - such as the one in the Town Park, which supports the only colony of cowberry in Shropshire outside the Stiperstones - while others sprouted fairy flax, yellow-wort and an abundance of spotted orchids, telling of more alkaline soils.

Telford's extraordinarily imaginative development plan integrated wild landscapes into a new town as never before in the UK - or perhaps since. Its intricate, spacious green network is not just an environmental asset, it's an economic one too, providing tranquil and pleasant surroundings to live and work in and 45 miles of footpaths to enjoy among fields, hedgerows, canals, ponds, heathland and woods. And it's singing with wildlife.

The Town Park, 170 hectares of open space, 62 of which are designated as a Local Nature Reserve (LNR), lies at the heart of the green network and, amazingly, within a wolf whistle of the centre of the town. Leave the crowded shopping malls and five minutes later you're surrounded by foliage, rustling softly. The further south you go, the deeper countryside you get into; hawthorns heavy with blossom in spring, laden with berries to feed the birds in autumn. Wherever you go there are reminders of the area's history - the towering chimney at Stirchley, shiny blue furnace slag surfacing tracks, canals that linked coal pits with iron foundries, transporting goods all over the country.

Telford doesn't stay still, however. It has been earmarked regionally as a growth area and is set to absorb 26,500 new homes by 2025, leaving the town's celebrated open spaces under threat. Already, the Langleyfields pitmounds, just outside the LNR, have been singled out for 'regeneration' - developed as industrial units. Regeneration is something they'd already done superlatively well naturally. A failed attempt to turn them into playing fields led to a further excavation and land sculpting, in a bid to restore the former heathland habitat.

Nature is making a comeback once again here and these pitmounds have significant populations of Telford's speciality butterflies, the dingy skipper and green hairstreak. Declining numbers elsewhere in the region make this site particularly valuable. Bare ground such as is found here is a vanishing feature of the Telford landscape, but it provides ideal conditions for bird's-foot trefoil, food plant of these and several other butterflies' caterpillars. The effects of developing the Paddock Mound/Langleyfields area as proposed in Telford & Wrekin's Strategic Framework would blast these sites and simultaneously weaken the viability of wildlife within the neighbouring nature reserve. Shropshire Wildlife Trust recommends that this area should instead be formally incorporated into the LNR.

Stronger protective measures backed up by investment, secured using external sources, are essential if Telford's precious mosaic of wild, post-industrial green space is to survive the next big expansion of the town.