



A local enthusiast shows off his skills.

Ghostriders in the park

A Crewe park that nurtured Olympic ambitions is keeping kids off the streets.

Ciara Leeming reports.

It may have produced an Olympic hopeful, but Crewe's BMX track had seen better days.

The Tipkinder Park course was where 19-year-old Beijing Olympics contender Shanaze Reade – a three-times world and eight-times European champion – honed her skills as a member of the Cheshire Ghostriders bike club.

But developments within the sport meant the small track was no longer suitable for training more advanced riders and could not host race meets. Local teens and children were also desperate for a skatepark.

So when the time came for park improvements three years ago, the two extreme sports were a key part of the plan.

Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council agreed to put in £250,000 and brought in Groundwork Cheshire to manage the project.

The lack of skate provision in the town meant the skatepark was prioritised, to give youngsters something to keep them off the streets.

Beijing Olympics contender Shanaze Reade honed her BMX skills at the park.

While the team got to work on surveys and drainage investigations, detailed consultations were held with young people to find out what they needed.

Project manager Peter Heberlet says: "We made contact with about 50 young skaters aged between about 10 and 20. We found some in and around town while they were out on their skateboards, and contacted others through websites.

"They talked to us about what they wanted from a skatepark – which was important because there are different sorts of skating. From that we decided what kind of jumps to put in, and what surface to use.

"The young people wanted a range of levels – so little kids would be able to use the park as well as the older skaters."

The resulting brief was sent to companies. Their drawings and 3D images were then shown to the skaters, who were asked to rate each one.



The firm with the highest score won the contract. About 10 youths stayed involved through the building phase – attending meetings, testing jumps and suggesting changes, until the facility was ready in September 2006.

While this was happening, Groundwork was raising money for the track project, which could not be funded by the local authority. BMX racing is now an Olympic event. A demonstration sport in Athens four years ago, it becomes a full sport for the first time this summer. Shanaze – who cut her teeth at Tipkinder – has qualified to compete in Beijing.

It took six months of fundraising to find the necessary £200,000 from sources including Barclays Spaces For Sport, WREN and Cheshire County Council.

The Ghostriders were involved throughout, and Groundwork was in regular consultation with the sport's governing body, British Cycling, to ensure the work met its national standards.

Two BMX riders worked closely with designers, doing trial rides and agreeing minor improvements. Shanaze – who travels the world for race meets – also tried the course out while it was being built.

The floodlit 300m track is now fit for training for the 2008 and 2012 Olympics, one of only a handful in the region. It was officially opened in January and hosted its first race meet in May.

"It was a regional Northwest race with 100 competitors ranging in age from seven years old to adults," says Peter. "You couldn't have had that kind of standard of meet there before."

Shanaze for one is pleased with the results, which she hopes will encourage more young people to get involved in BMXing – which remains a niche sport, albeit one that's growing in popularity.

"BMX racing has taken me all over the world and I am confident that I will be competing in this year's Beijing Olympic Games," she says. "I hope to encourage and welcome more local people to BMX racing with the Cheshire Ghostriders BMX Club."

BEST & WORST

BEST

"Creating a BMX track isn't a perfect science and everyone has completely different views on how the course should be, which meant making decisions could take longer than we expected. Once we'd made a decision we'd stick to it, as going back and fiddling would cost more money."

WORST

"The biggest problem turned out to be the weather. The BMX project was finished almost six months late, and at one point we had to stop work for three months because of the rain. It was a challenge to keep the young people enthused when we had little to show for our work."