

source^{NW}

WATERS | REGENERATION | ENVIRONMENT | SUSTAINABILITY

DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS

A personal tribute to Liverpool's thriving docks.

ALIEN INVASION

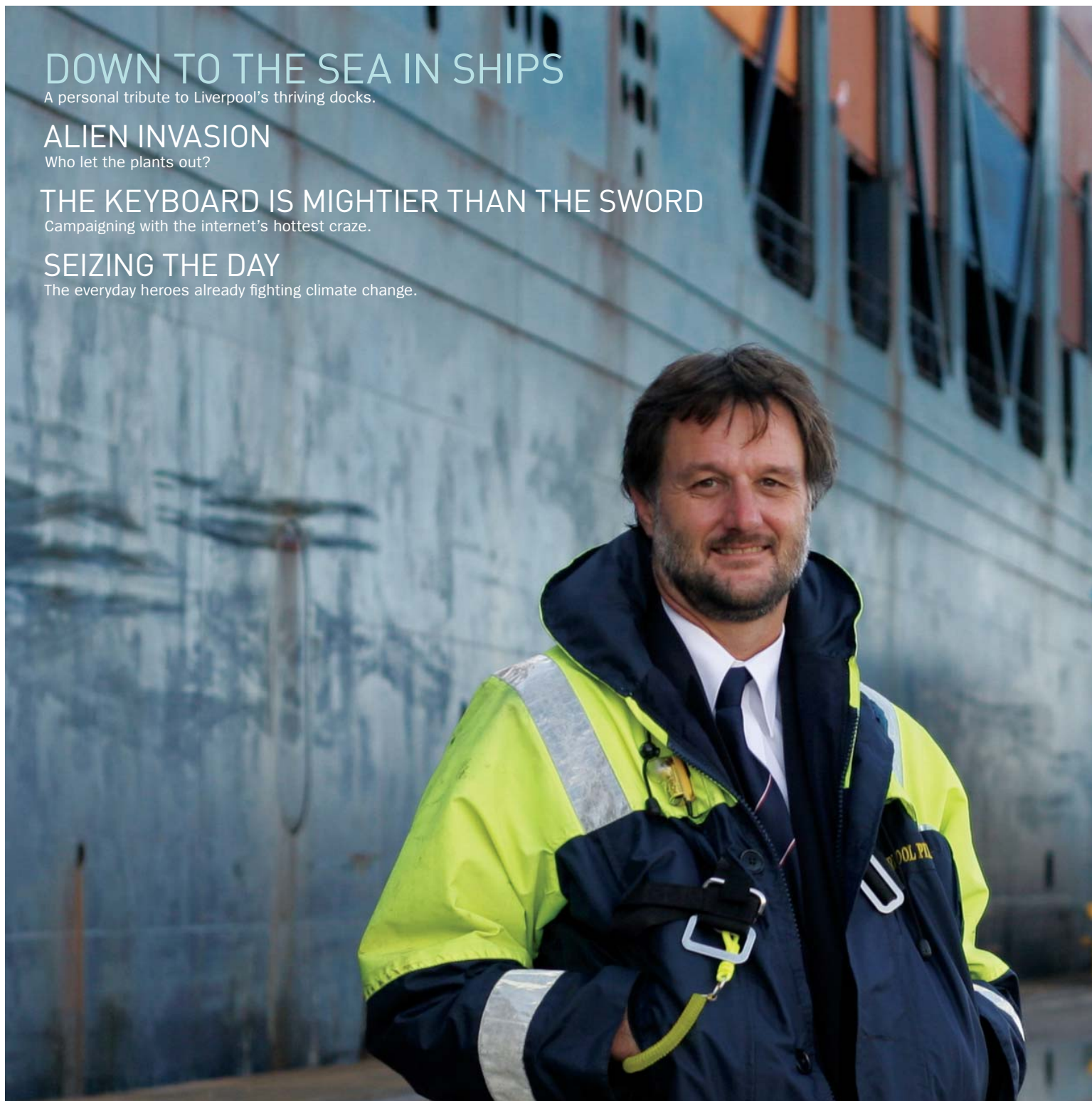
Who let the plants out?

THE KEYBOARD IS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Campaigning with the internet's hottest craze.

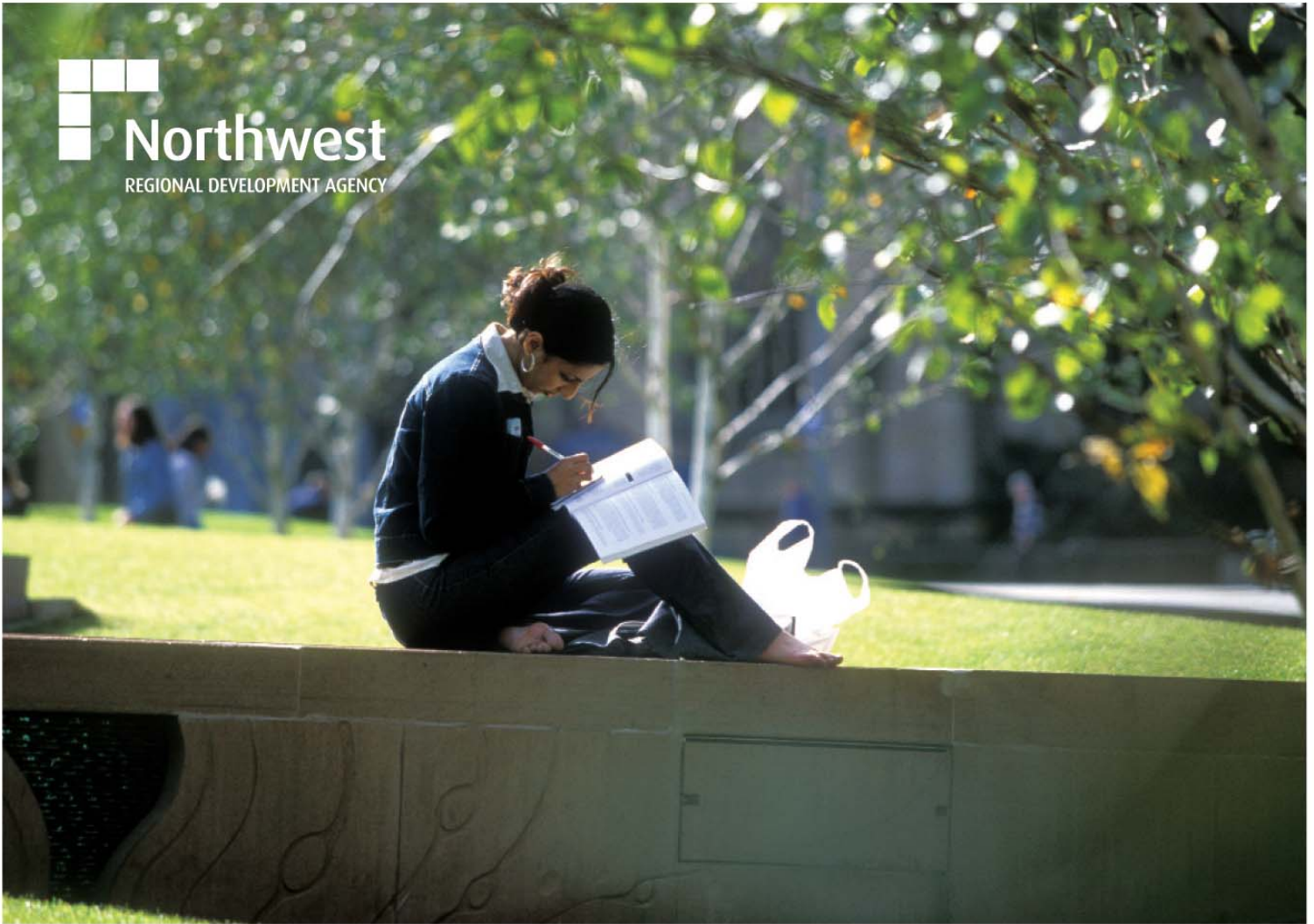
SEIZING THE DAY

The everyday heroes already fighting climate change.





Northwest
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCY



Creating a better environment for England's Northwest

The Northwest Regional Development Agency is ensuring that England's Northwest becomes a leading region for sustainable development by:

- Signing up to England's Northwest Climate Change Charter, an initiative to encourage the public and private sectors to commit to reducing energy consumption and reliance on fossil fuels.
- Developing a Climate Change Action Plan to prepare the region for the impacts of climate change.
- Supporting initiatives such as BREW and ENWORKS, which are helping small to medium sized companies increase their competitiveness by making environmental improvements.
- Promoting the use of renewable energy through the CIS Solar Tower project in Manchester, which aims to create 180,000 units of renewable electricity each year.

For further details please contact **01925 400 100**
or visit **www.nwda.co.uk** or
www.englandsnorthwest.com

INVESTING IN
englandsnorthwest



At a time when the role of traditional industries in the Northwest economy is

ever diminishing, it seems strange to find that one such industry is making a spirited come back. After a few lean years in the 1980s, the Port of Liverpool is busier than ever. The days when the city's docks fuelled its rise as one of the Empire's great ports and kept busy a sizable chunk of the local population are, admittedly, long gone. But that misses the point.

As business journalist Michael Taylor found out when he took a tour of the docks for his article on page 14, they are at the apex of a regional maritime sector that employs 15,000 people across 900 different businesses with a combined turnover of £3 billion a year.

Michael's account of life at the dockside is drawn from an upcoming book, *Mersey: the river that changed the world*, to be published in November by Bluecoat Press. It is accompanied by superb images from photographer Colin McPherson.

Each issue of Source this year will bring you another article based on a chapter from the book. With Liverpool's City of Culture year on the horizon, we feel the time is right for a beautiful book honouring the Mersey's 20-year transformation.

Matthew Sutcliffe, editor
m.sutcliffe@merseybasin.org.uk

Source^{NW} is the magazine of the Mersey Basin Campaign. The campaign works towards better water quality and sustainable waterside regeneration for the rivers and waterways of England's Northwest.

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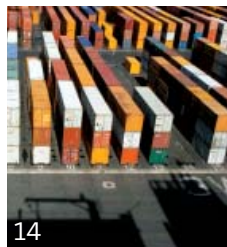
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LOCAL ANGLER DAVE ROBERTS WITH HIS 27-POUND COD

Back from the dead zone

UN apologises for saying the Mersey is ‘dead’ and hails its ‘inspirational’ transformation.

The United Nations says the return of wildlife to the Mersey Estuary is an inspiration to marine ‘dead zones’ around the world.

The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) has also agreed that the estuary should never have been included in its recent preliminary list of global dead zones, and confirmed that it has been removed from the final version.

We remain deeply concerned about the problem of marine dead zones around the world.

UNEP spokesperson Nick Nuttall, said: “The leadership that the Northwest has shown to address the problems of pollution in the Mersey is exemplary. “We would urge the experts and leaders in the region to share their success with others internationally, so that the lessons of the Mersey can be applied to dead zones around the globe.”

Marine dead zones are areas where low levels of oxygen make it difficult for fish and other marine life to survive. They have been tracked globally since the 1970s and have increased every decade, with the number rising from 149 in 2004 to around 200 today. They were once associated with industrialised countries but are

showing up more and more around developing countries.

However, the River Mersey is now home to porpoise, seals and salmon, following a massive 20-year clean-up operation and investment of over a billion pounds by United Utilities. A local angler recently caught a 27-pound cod in the river.

So when UNEP announced its preliminary list of 200 dead zones around the world to a meeting in Beijing late last year, the inclusion for the first time of the Mersey Estuary provoked consternation amongst several Northwest experts.

Among them was Peter Jones, a senior scientist with the Environment Agency, whose scientific paper Mersey: Back from the Dead, details the transformation of the river since the 1970s, when it was indeed a dead zone.

Peter wrote to UNEP’s American research team urging them to remove the Mersey from their list “in the light of the unequivocal evidence that the river has been transformed and our hopes that more can be achieved.”

He said: “I’m very happy that UNEP has acknowledged the Mersey is now anything but a dead zone.”

“My concern was in scientific accuracy, not

in scoring points off the UN or its research team.”

Professor Robert Diaz, who led UNEP’s Virginia-based researchers, acknowledged that: “The Mersey, along with the East River in Manhattan, are systems that have improved greatly. Both are examples of what can be done to improve water quality and bottom habitat quality.”

UNEP’s Nick Nuttall explained: “This was a preliminary document and as is often the case it needed to be revisited.

“Although we are delighted to hear about the work on the Mersey, we remain deeply concerned about the growing problem of marine dead zones around the world.”

The final list of dead zones will be published early this year and will include sites in Finland, China, Ghana, Peru, Greece and Portugal, amongst others.

MORE INFORMATION

www.unep.org

SOUND BITES

S That sinking feeling. Who would have thought an innocent childhood toy would turn out to be an environmental hazard? It seems those glinting metallic balloons that bob their cheery helium-filled way across the sky can end up floating limply on the surface of the sea, where marine mammals like sea turtles, whales and dolphins mistake them for tasty treats such as jellyfish, with deadly consequences. Hence the Don’t Let Go campaign from the Marine Conservation Society. The idea isn’t to deny yourself the joy of balloons entirely, but simply to use the old fashioned rubber kind – rather than the new fangled mylar ones – and, naturally, to keep hold of them. www.mcsuk.org

S BBC is the quay. The BBC’s planned move to MediaCity at Salford Quays is already encouraging further regeneration. Two private developers have unveiled plans for major new office buildings close

to MediaCity’s waterfront site. Yorkshire developer KW Linfoot is planning a £105 million scheme to include office space and 1,000 apartments in four new waterfront buildings by architects Aedas. Meanwhile Dutch-owned HBG Properties are behind plans for a new six storey office development on a site fronting Trafford Road.

S Notta lotta bottles. Bottled water has been banned from meetings at the Dept. for the Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs, as the government bows to pressure to support tap water as a cheaper and less energy-intensive alternative. Not to be outdone, Liverpool City Council has also voted to ditch bottled water – saving around £48,000 a year in the process. The 19,000-strong workforce will also see its water coolers phased out to help save the planet. As the Sunday Times put it: “Of all the food fads, bottled water is probably the silliest. Given the inestimable luxury of cheap, clean, cold water gushing into our kitchens...”

S Kings ransom. £51 million a year – that’s the amount experts predict the new 10,600 seat Kings Dock arena and convention centre will inject into Liverpool’s economy. Along with the surrounding Kings Waterfront developments, it’s due to open early next year, in time to celebrate the city’s European Capital of Culture crown. With 42 events already booked for 2008 and beyond, the £146 million facility is expected to create over 2,000 jobs.

S An American warship in England. For two years during the American Civil War the Confederate raiding ship CSS Alabama plundered the Atlantic, wreaking havoc on Union shipping and ransacking over 60 prizes valued at \$6 million. She was finally sunk off



Liverpool rising

Mersey skyscrapers will rival Shanghai, New York and Vancouver.

The Northwest's biggest regeneration scheme for over a century will turn a huge area of derelict Liverpool docks into a skyline to rival the world's most famous waterfronts, claims developer Peel Holdings.

The entire scheme, known as Liverpool Waters, is expected to cost up to £5.5 billion and could take between 30 and 50 years to complete.

Plans unveiled by Peel include skyscrapers incorporating advanced wind turbines into their design, which could generate around 10 per cent of the power used by the new development. One tower is envisaged with a huge metal spiral running through it to harness wind blowing off the River Mersey.

Another proposal is for a futuristic monorail linking the development to the city centre and Liverpool John Lennon airport. A cruise liner terminal big enough to take the world's largest luxury ships is also on the drawing board, which

Peel says would complement the city council's cruise facility already under construction near the Pier Head.

Plans for the 60 hectare site at the city's run-down Central Docks encompass over 50 buildings including four hotels, homes for 50,000 people, almost 2 million square metres of office space, restaurants, bars, leisure facilities and a marina. It would create an estimated 17,000 full-time jobs.

Many of the buildings are set to be skyscrapers over 50 storeys high, individually designed by leading architects from around the world to ensure a mix of styles.

Peel's development director Lindsey Ashworth said: "This is Liverpool's front door to the world, and it is [currently] an absolute disgrace. It is what people will see when they arrive on cruise ships along the Mersey.

"Liverpool has a beautiful shoreline but it is not big enough, it is not tall enough and it is not great enough...there should be buildings lit up, there should be reflections on the water.

"Liverpool Waters is a visionary scheme that will transform the waterfront and put the city in the same league as other magnificent waterside cities that are famed and admired worldwide."

Peel has a formidable record in delivering major projects – it is the company that built the Trafford Centre and which also owns Liverpool John Lennon airport, the Manchester Ship Canal and Liverpool Docks.

Liverpool Waters is the company's second major proposal in less than a year. Last September it announced plans for a scheme called Wirral Waters that mirrors the new proposals, but on the opposite shore of the Mersey. Together, the two schemes promise investment of around £10 billion.

Many of the skyscrapers will be individually designed by leading architects from around the world.

However, Mr Ashworth admitted that the plans fly in the face of the planning system. The sheer scale of the proposals also means they will almost certainly be called in for government scrutiny. Not to mention Liverpool's history of seeing grand designs for regeneration wither on the vine.

But, said Mr Ashworth: "This is our vision and if we get support for our vision we will see it through."

the French coast near Cherbourg in 1864. But the South's most successful raider started her life at the Laird Brothers Shipyard in Birkenhead – a representative having arrived on the Wirral carrying \$1 million in Confederate currency. Which is why the Wirral Maritime Heritage Trail has recently been named the first Civil War Discovery Trail in the UK. www.civilwar.org

S Moving on. Tortoiseshell limpets and acorn barnacles are amongst the species feeling the impact of climate change, according to a new four-year study. The MarClim project mapped the distribution of 57 marine species at more than 400 locations across the UK. It discovered that some are already being forced to move in

search of cooler waters as the seas around Britain's coast warm up. Marine species are also moving more quickly and further than their terrestrial counterparts. www.mba.ac.uk

S Walking back to happiness. The modern obsession with shopping still can't compete with a good old fashioned stroll in the countryside, according to new research commissioned by Natural England. Only 12 per cent of people said they had been shopping for fun in the previous week, compared to 18 per cent who had enjoyed a good walk. However, 37 per cent of adults surveyed hadn't made a leisure trip of any kind in the previous week. Dr Helen Phillips, chief executive of Natural England, said: "People are missing out on the wide range of benefits that the natural environment offers, particularly to their health and wellbeing." www.naturalengland.org.uk/press/releases2007/090107.htm

S Underwater map. A new map of the sea around Britain showing forty-four 'marine landscapes' with underwater mountains, valleys and plains has been unveiled by the UKSeaMap project. The map is the first of its kind in Europe. What's innovative is that the researchers developed new ways of predicting how the habitats and ecology of the seafloor varies across large areas. Dr Paul Gilliland, chair of the project's steering group, said: "We need to develop more sustainable management of the marine environment as a whole, not least in response to the growing use of the sea and the need to protect it." www.jncc.gov.uk/UKSeaMap

S River of light. A laser light show will flash above the River Mersey later this year if proposals currently under development prove successful. Lasers would project across the river onto four giant ventilation shafts that rise from the Mersey tunnel, two on the Birkenhead shore and two on the Liverpool side. One of the world's top lighting specialists, Laser Creations International, has been invited to develop ideas for the spectacle.



Pride, passion and pergolas

A delightful new book from photographer Len Grant captures the changing face of East Manchester, one of the country's biggest regeneration zones. In over forty images, *Pride, passion and pergolas* sets out to record the thoughts and testimonials of local people as they respond to the changes in their communities.

Everyday life is seen afresh in the click of Len's shutter. Sean McGonigle of New East Manchester said: "East Manchester is now a much more pleasant place to live, and this book tells the story of our journey to get there. We hope that local people of all ages enjoy and get inspiration from the book."

Liverpool's waterfront x-factor

The blanket from John Lennon and Yoko Ono's 1969 'bed in' for peace and a spectacular model of Sir Edwin Lutyens' original design for Liverpool Catholic cathedral are set for permanent public display, after a vital £11.4 million grant was earmarked for fitting out the proposed new Museum of Liverpool.

The dramatic X-shaped building by Danish architects 3XN features vast picture windows giving sweeping vistas of the River Mersey, and is slated for the vacant Mann Island site on the city's waterfront – the same spot previously reserved for the doomed 'Cloud' building.

The money, from the Heritage Lottery Fund, closes the funding gap for the controversial project to £10 million. National Museums Liverpool says it will allow them to dust off many previously hidden treasures from the city's history – the vast model of Lutyen's Catholic

cathedral shows why, had it been built, it would have been the second biggest in the world after St Peter's in Rome.

Carole Souter, director of the Heritage Lottery Fund, said: "We're delighted to be able to support this ambitious project which will bring the city's complex story to life."

The Northwest Regional Development Agency has also contributed £32.7 million to the project.

But the building's radical post-modernist design has split local opinion. Supporters claim it will be a world class visitor attraction used by up to 750,000 people a year, as well as a stunning building on possibly the city's most important site. Others are concerned it could

provoke the United Nations into withdrawing the waterfront's coveted World Heritage Site status.



Stressed out

Demand for water is set to outstrip supply in some parts of the UK due to a combination of population density, over-use and climate change, according to predictions from the Environment Agency.

The agency has released a consultation document, Identifying Areas of Water Stress, mapping out the parts of the country it thinks are already running short of water or are likely to do so in the future.

It is calling for improved efficiency and more water metering in the areas most at risk, mainly in the Southeast. It warns that "elsewhere in England the stress on water resources is lower but still significant."

Environment Agency chief executive Barbara Young,

said: "We expect climate change to reduce the availability of water resources because of longer, drier summers.

"If we are to meet the long term needs of society and the economy without overexploiting our environment, we need to understand how to target our water saving efforts and make better use of the water we have."

She said the agency wants to see water meters installed in all houses in the Southeast by 2015, as long as social safeguards are in place to protect low income and vulnerable households.

"The benefits of metering in reducing demand and energy, and helping with more effective leakage management are unchallengeable."

MORE INFORMATION

www.environment-agency.gov.uk/yourenv/consultations/1690000/?lang=_e

Tel: 01903832275

The consultation period for classifying areas of water stress closes on April 24th.

Almost home

Race is on to buy iron men.

Campaigners are racing to raise £2 million to buy a popular art installation in Merseyside after planners dramatically overturned a previous decision to banish the artwork.

At a specially convened meeting, members of Sefton Council planning committee voted in favour of revised plans to keep the artwork. It consists of 100 cast-iron men gazing out to sea from Crosby beach that were set in place by renowned sculpture Antony Gormley, maker of the Angel of the North in Gateshead. The statues are cast from Gormley's own body.

Amongst those at the meeting was a delighted Mr Gormley, who warmly welcomed the decision.

"It's wonderful that my homeless, wandering tribe of men have a permanent home.

"So many people in the area and outside have given their support and shared with me the sense of achievement in creating Another Place in this extraordinary setting."



At the forefront of the fight to save the iron men has been Another Place Ltd. According to its head, Lewis Biggs, more than £1 million has been raised from grants to pay for the statues, and a campaign to get private money to make up the rest has now be launched.

Last October the council stunned admirers of the artwork by insisting the iron men must be removed on health and safety grounds.

But the tide of public opinion turned swiftly and a campaign to save them took hold within days. Campaigners also altered the original planning application to address safety and nature conservation issues. As well creating fewer disturbances for birds, the changes remove statues from the most dangerous parts of the beach, improve access for sailors and create a new search and rescue corridor.

Welcome back, otters

Popular species is well on the way to recovery.

Last year, for the first time in over a century, otters were spotted in central London. The discovery crowns a remarkable come back – since falling to near extinction in the 1970s the elusive animals have returned to every major city in the UK.

Now the government wants to see them return to at least 85 per cent of their former river habitat by 2015, with the target written into the country's newly revised Biodiversity Action Plans. However, they currently remain a threatened species.

"The gradual recovery of otters has been very promising over the past two decades, and we want to ensure this continues," said Environment Agency otter specialist Graham Scholey.

"In the late 1970s our initial goal was to consolidate numbers and stop the otter population from

further losses. At that time only six per cent of traditional sites in England had evidence of otters.

"But scientific surveys have shown that otters have returned to at least 75 percent of the territory that they traditionally called home."

The most promising improvement in otter populations has been in England where otters can be found in almost twice as many areas as they could ten years ago.

Mr Scholey said: "Working with local wildlife trusts and water companies to improve water quality, riverbank habitats and wetlands has undoubtedly helped the otter populations to establish and grow.

"As top predator, the otter is one the most valuable indicators of a healthy water environment, and achievement of these targets will be testimony to the continued improvement in the state of our rivers."

New targets for BAPs can be found at www.ukbap-reporting.org.uk

April 18-19 Eighth Annual River Restoration Network Conference

A two-day conference focusing on river restoration as a means to deliver sustainable flood risk management and the objectives of the Water Framework Directive. The event will provide a forum for river restoration practitioners to share their experience and expertise. Optional site visits on 20 April.

Venue: University of Chester

More information: 01525 863 341

rrc@therrc.co.uk www.therrc.co.uk

April 24 Fourth Annual Public Health Conference in the Northwest

A one-day conference with a full programme of keynote speakers and parallel sessions. For more information on the full programme, please contact the organisers.

Venue: Hilton Hotel, North Promenade, Blackpool

More information: Richard Lincoln 01524 593 936

r.lincoln@lancaster.ac.uk

May 16 Northwest Business Environment Awards 2007

The only regional awards scheme celebrating the environmental achievements of businesses in the Northwest, featuring high profile speakers from the business community and the environmental movement. Hosted by the Mersey Basin Campaign and the Northwest Regional Development Agency with support from the CBI Northwest, ENWORKS, Envirolink Northwest, Environment Agency and the Institute of Directors.

Venue: Bridgewater Hall, Manchester

More information: Fouzia Bhatti 0161 242 8200

f.bhatti@merseybasin.org.uk www.merseybasin.co.uk

May 25 Planning for Climate Change – the Challenge for Water

A half-day seminar focusing on dealing with the impact of climate change on water in England's Northwest. This is the latest in the series of seminars under the ENMaR banner.

Venue: The University of Manchester

More information: Caroline Riley 0161 242 8206

c.riley@merseybasin.org.uk www.enmar.org.uk

June 2 Mend the World

If you want to find out how small changes in behaviour can make a big difference to climate change, then come along to a fun and informative day in Warrington town centre. A wide range of exhibitors will be on hand to provide advice on how to save energy in your home, recycle, use water wisely and much more.

Venue: Golden Square, Warrington

More information: Christine Hough 01925 542379

Christine.hough@environment-agency.gov.uk

June 13-15 World Canal Conference 2007

The world's biggest canal conference comes to the Northwest. This year it aims to identify the key elements and contributors required to create sustainable waterside communities.

Opportunities will be provided to see examples of best practice in regeneration and to network with the present World Canal's Conference community.

Venue: Crowne Plaza, Liverpool

More Information: 01516 493 600

wcc@millsmediagroup.com www.wcc2007.co.uk

Love

Why I love... wind farms

By Dave Coleman, management trainer at The Ridgeway Consultancy.



“When I see a hill side with some wind turbines on the top I find it inspiring and exciting. It’s great to think that because they’re up there we’re generating free energy without producing any pollution. That’s helping us to deal with climate change and that’s why I love them.

Yes, they do have an environmental impact in that you can see them but the positive benefits they bring far outweigh any downside. I think they’re a symbol of a more sustainable way of life, a way of life that’s very different from how we’ve been living for the last 100 years.

I think most people agree we’re facing a climate change crisis, largely due to our use of fossil fuels. So cutting back on these fuels, both by being more energy efficient and by using renewable energy, is vital.

We need to act quickly in order to drastically cut our CO₂ emissions and while on-shore wind farms are just one example of a basket of renewable energy options, at the moment they are the most accessible and cost-effective way of rapidly producing renewable energy.

You can put them up in six months and they start generating immediately. Within a year they will have repaid the energy used in their manufacture and after that they start making a positive contribution to emissions reduction for the next 25 years.

Off-shore wind farms are great and also have a role to play but because of their location they take longer to build and typically cost up to three times more. This makes them less attractive to investors but, like tidal power, their time will come.

Some people seem to want to keep things just as they are but that doesn’t take into account the fact that climate change is already changing the environment, whether we like it or not.

Clearly wind farms do have an impact on the landscape but ultimately climate change is going to do far more real damage than the visual effect of a handful of turbines.”

Hate

Why I hate... wind farms

By Ann Metcalfe from the Friends of Scout and Knowl Moor.



“Having lived on this moorland all my life, to have it spoilt by these mechanical monsters is just unbelievable. Not only are they an eyesore but the damage that they’ve done to the land itself is immense. And how much carbon has been created making these things?

Why not put them down the side of motorways where there’s turbulence created by the constant flow of traffic, or in built up areas where there’s more of a history of industrial landscapes?

People come up to Knowl Hill and the surrounding moorland for the tranquillity, not to listen to the thud and pounding of the turbines. When you’re out on the moor you’re looking and listening, enjoying the wildlife and the landscape. Walk for just ten minutes and you can be completely alone but that level of tranquillity has gone now that the turbines are being built. There’s no argument against that.

Although I can see the grace of their lines and accept that some people may find them attractive, they make me churn up inside; they make me feel uncomfortable because they simply don’t fit in with the landscape. They’re not in character with the natural setting.

I think another big problem will be people driving past, seeing them and thinking they are doing something about climate change. But I think they’re just a token gesture. I’m not convinced of the benefits they can bring and I’m sure there are far more effective methods of either creating energy or conserving it than having turbines stuck out on the moors.

But my main gripe is that the amount of ecological damage they do, whether it be here or any other landscape, is far greater than the value of any output that they may eventually create – and that’s providing they actually work.

I just don’t think they’re worth it and the only winners in the end are the developers... and at our expense.”

No holes in this funding

Brockholes wetland in Lancashire will be turned into a huge new nature reserve after supporters staved off a funding crisis by raising £50,000 in just three weeks.

The site, encircled by the River Ribble, is the size of 130 football pitches and sits adjacent to the M6 near Preston. It features a mosaic of open water, reed beds and flower-rich grassland that are home to a variety of birds including lapwing, sand martin and kingfisher, together with more vulnerable species such as whimbrel, skylark and reed bunting. It also adjoins

the largest ancient woodland in Lancashire, where badgers and bluebells thrive.

Lancashire Wildlife Trust had already put together a funding package of £1.5 million to purchase the site. But to clinch the deal the trust found itself needing to draw in a final £50,000 within a month.

So with time running out, it launched a public appeal – and a flood of donations meant that the total was reached after only three weeks.

Trust chief executive Anne Selby, said: “This is the biggest land purchase in the

history of the Wildlife Trust and we thank the people of Lancashire, Manchester and north Merseyside for their generosity.”

The first part of the project will be to work on drainage, pathways, signage and safety features. The second phase will include the construction of classrooms, shops and a visitor centre.

Visitors will be encouraged to walk, cycle or perhaps even paddle a canoe to experience the wildlife face to face.



Northwest water forums 2007

Every year people come together to discuss the opportunities and challenges facing the Northwest's rivers and waterways at a series of events around the region, hosted by the Mersey Basin Campaign.

These forums are an ideal opportunity to find out more about your local rivers and waterways, enjoy expert presentations and do some productive networking. There are also valuable opportunities to raise topical issues – you can take one of the five minute soapbox spots and air your opinions on any relevant subject.

The forums welcome everyone from local environmentalists and volunteers to water industry experts and policy makers. All the forums take place in the morning, include lunch and are free to attend.

Booking

To book a place at any of the above forums please contact Bev Mitchell on 0161 242 8212 or email b.mitchell@merseybasin.org.uk

Or you can fill out the information on this tear sheet and return it to Bev Mitchell, Mersey Basin Campaign, Fourways House, 57 Hilton Street, Manchester, M1 2EJ.

More information

To find out more about any of these forums, or about other events run by the Mersey Basin Campaign and its partner organisations, please visit the events section of our website, www.merseybasin.org.uk

Greater Manchester Waters Forum
Thursday May 30th
Manchester Town Hall

Mersey Estuary Forum
Thursday June 14th
Liverpool Maritime Museum

Cheshire Waters Forum
Thursday July 1st
Crewe Alexander FC

Ribble Waters Forum
Thursday November 1st
Woodland Conference Centre, Chorley

Please tick one or more forums you would like to attend and return the completed form to the address above.

Your name.....
 Name of your organisation.....
 Address of your organisation.....

Telephone number.....
 Email address.....
 Number of places required.....
 Special dietary requirements.....

Little short of the Triffids could be more dangerous than the exotic plants waging war on our native species.



ALIEN INVASION

It's little surprise that Japanese knotweed – with its heart-shaped leaves and delicate cream flowers – caught the eye of nineteenth century botanists visiting the Orient. Like many new and exotic arrivals, it captured the public imagination and was planted widely. But the Victorian passion for exotic plants, which brought hundreds of alien species to Britain, is one many ecologists now rue.

From central Asia came giant hogweed – tall, spiky with umbrella-like white flowers – and utterly unlike anything in Britain. Himalayan balsam, with its long green and red leaves and pink or purple flowers, was promoted as an inexpensive alternative to orchids.

Their cheap seeds were used in gardens across the country and the resulting plants thrived.

No-one imagined they would become an ecological disaster on a par with the grey squirrel or Chinese mitten crab.

More than a century on, a handful of non-native plants are wreaking environmental havoc and costing landowners millions of pounds to tackle.

Thanks to dizzying growth rates, a lack of competitors and a terrifying ability to spread, these species are now ubiquitous and causing mayhem in the wild. Invasive plants are now believed to pose the leading threat to biodiversity, after human activity. Both Japanese knotweed and giant hogweed are deemed so problematic they are already

controlled under law, while a review of regulations could see others added to the list.

Georgina Fellows, a biodiversity officer with the Environment Agency, says: "They cause a huge threat to our natural habitats. Each poses different problems but they are all notoriously difficult to deal with.

"The common characteristic is that they grow extremely fast, take over huge new territories each season and are very resilient. They are expensive to control and very difficult to get rid of completely."



Words
Ciara Leeming

Photographs
Sean Wilton
Lucy Burton

Whether they live on land or in water, invasive plants upset delicate ecosystems by starving native vegetation of light and key nutrients. Native species are overwhelmed and the outsiders take over. Insects that relied on the disappearing flora for food or as a place to lay eggs are inevitably affected and some may eventually become extinct.

About a third of plants introduced by the Victorians escaped over the garden wall and into the wild, but few became a problem. Those which did were well suited

to local soil and climatic conditions, and able to spread quickly and easily. On land, giant hogweed, Japanese knotweed and Himalayan balsam have achieved almost total domination of swathes of Britain – favouring waterways, rail embankments, wasteland and brownfield sites.

Knotweed spreads through its roots, or rhizomes – a tiny two-millimetre fragment can sprout into a recognisable new plant in six days. It is common along rivers and waterways because tiny fragments are easily spread downstream on the current.

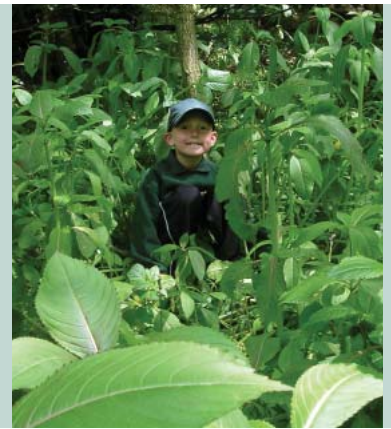
The others propagate by seed. Each hogweed flower sends 50,000 tiny seeds

into the atmosphere to invade new territories – many land in rivers and are carried downstream. Each seed can lie dormant for up to 15 years. Balsam develops seedpods known as “jumping jacks” – which burst open with an audible pop and can fling their seeds up to 10 km away, with the assistance of the wind.

[CONTINUED OVER]

**RIGHT AND MIDDLE:
CHILDREN ENJOY 'BALSAM BASHING'**

**FAR RIGHT:
HIMALAYAN BALSAM'S ATTRACTIVE FLOWERS
WERE POPULAR WITH THE VICTORIANS**



Sarah Whitman, of Action Darwen Valley, says: "Environmentally, they're a disaster. They put on lots of vegetation over the summer, which dies back in winter, and both Hogweed and Himalayan balsam have shallow root systems.

"With few other plants given the chance to grow there's little to bind the soil, which leaves the ground susceptible to erosion. During storms or heavy rain, eroded riverbanks make flooding more likely."

Hogweed is of particular concern because its giant leaves and stems, which grow several metres tall, contain poisonous sap that irritates skin. Several children have already been severely hurt after playing with the plant, and it's just as dangerous to adults.

Sarah says: "It can result in third-degree burns and leave skin sensitive to sunlight for six years after contact. This is a big worry for us because hogweed is often found close to footpaths. I'd hate anyone to have a nasty accident."

These plants are wreaking environmental havoc and costing landowners millions of pounds to tackle.

Problem plants are not confined to dry land. Floating pennywort – a North American pondweed introduced by garden centres during the 1980s and still on sale – grows up to 20cm a day, suffocating other water plants and creatures. It grows happily in shallow, slow-flowing water such as canals and forms dense, interwoven mats of vegetation, which starve the water – and its natural inhabitants – of light, nutrients and oxygen. The weed also creates a flood risk by blocking the waterway.

Tommy Ratcliffe, of Winsford Angling Club in Cheshire, which fishes along the River Weaver, has watched the situation worsen each year. He says: "It's horrendous. In 1999 there were one or two patches along our part of the river, but the following year there were 75. Since then it's gone up and up – one patch stretched across a distance of over 100m.

"We have 231 fishing positions on the river, but about 75 are unusable because of this weed.

"It is choking the life out of the river. I don't think

we'll have much left in a couple of years." As well as threatening our native flora, Japanese knotweed brings an additional challenge – one that is adding millions to the cost of regeneration. It has a dubious talent for exposing weaknesses in hard-engineered structures such as concrete, tarmac, brick walls and foundations. So serious is the problem that at least one knotweed colony is thought to have penetrated every 10 sq km of land in England and Wales.

Developers are legally required to tackle knotweed infestations in order to secure planning permission, and landowners must make sure it does not spread from their land – although they are not obliged to remove it. Knotweed and hogweed both fall under section nine of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 – causing them to grow wild carries a possible two-year prison sentence. Their status as controlled waste means debris and contaminated soil must be collected and burned or disposed of at licensed landfill sites.

Dealing with these weeds is highly specialised work, largely carried out by entrepreneurial environmental companies, and is believed to cost Britain some £2 billion a year.

New techniques are being developed, and competition is fierce. Spraying with the herbicide glyphosate, which controls the weed and can be used near water, is relatively cheap but takes several seasons; precious time the construction industry cannot spare. Matt Montgomery, of Bury-based environmental consultants Leyden Kirby Associates, says: "It can take many years to tackle an outbreak in this way, which is more of a form of control than a real solution.

"The best way to get rid of knotweed is by digging it up and removing the roots and fragments from the soil. We sift the soil by hand and take the root down to a certain size.

"We then bury what's left below two metres of soil and go back the following year to check for re-growth. All the root pieces are then put in the incinerator."

Inevitably, this effectiveness costs money. With this kind of process, every square metre of knotweed produces at least three tonnes of landfill material at a cost of £100 per tonne. Sifting out the rhizomes costs about £10,000 for an area of 200 sq m. The high prices means those who develop cheaper methods could snatch valuable contracts.

Musketeers Environmental Ltd, in Ramsbottom, offers what it says is a more cost-effective, eco-friendly way to deal with infestations. The firm has worked on big projects for the Environment Agency, Highways Agency and Network Rail, among others and believes its involvement in a high profile new bypass in Cornwall will cut the budget by half a million pounds.



Owner Maxime Jay says: "We use a method that ensures we get every bit of the weed. We re-use what we excavate which reduces the volume of waste. "Where other methods would leave tens of thousands of tonnes, we may take less than 20 tonnes to landfill. This brings both cost and environment benefits."



Invasive plants are now believed to pose one of the leading threats to biodiversity.

Other developments include early stage research, being managed by Groundwork East Lancashire, which aims to suck up knotweed and put it through composting machines heated to 60 degrees, rendering the plant inert.

While the statutory demands concerning knotweed cause problems for developers, a lack of funding means many other species are left largely to conservationists. Little public money is available to help tackle the plants – and any campaigns tend to be short-term and their effects temporary.

In Lancashire’s Darwen Valley, environmental staff manage hogweed spread as best they can, by cutting back plants at several sites a year before they come into seed. To do this they must wear full protective clothing.

Himalayan balsam is easier to deal with and many projects involve children and community groups. Gemma Tomlinson, of Action Douglas & Yarrow, holds annual ‘balsam bashes’ where youngsters from a local primary school help pull the weeds out by hand. She says: “They love it. They are helping us out and learning about the environment at the same time.

“The aim is not to get rid of balsam completely – we know that’s unlikely. But we have to manage its spread or the land will be overwhelmed.”

Saddleworth Parish Council, also in Lancashire, recently set aside £2,000 from this year’s budget and the same from the next to help clear the pest from the banks of the River Tame.

Floating pennywort, too, is difficult to deal with. Official guidance warns vegetation should be cut away and immediately removed from the water. Any fragments left behind will grow into new patches and compound the crisis – something the Winsford anglers suspect may have occurred along the River Weaver.

While haphazard and piecemeal eradication work is taking place across the country, many working in this field agree a lack of clear strategy could be holding action back. Responsibility for invasive species is currently spread across several government departments and agencies and policy is inevitably uncoordinated. It’s an issue that needs attention, admits the Environment Agency’s Georgina Fellows.

“This is something which has been raised at quite a few conferences that I have been to over recent years,” she says.

“All the agencies are giving advice on these weeds, but there is no overall strategy on control. That is definitely a weakness and needs to be looked at.”

The idea is nothing new. A 2003 working group report commissioned by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) raised similar points and called for something to be done to close the loophole. “It is necessary to focus the political responsibility for this issue by designating or creating a single lead coordinating organisation,” it says.

A DEFRA spokeswoman says officials are now working to put an invasive species strategy in place but stressed the process was lengthy and would first have to include a consultation.

In a separate initiative, a review is likely to be carried out to decide whether more problem plants should be controlled under law.

NASTY STUFF

- Giant hogweed looks benign – like a giant version of the familiar cow parsley. But it is truly a giant problem, growing up to 5m tall in a single summer with leaves 1.5m wide, and producing 25cm wide exploding seed pods containing 1,500 seeds.
- Its sap contains a substance that makes the skin sensitive to sunlight, causing burns, swelling and painful blistering. Large, watery blisters usually appear 15 to 20 hours after contact with the sap and exposure to sunlight.
- Damaged skin heals very slowly and can develop a type of dermatitis that flares up in sunlight for which there is no straightforward treatment.
- If you come into contact with the sap, cover the affected area straightaway to reduce exposure to sunlight and wash it IMMEDIATELY and thoroughly with soap and water.

“This is a problem we do take very seriously,” she says. “We are committed to reviewing how we deal with it to see whether there is any need to update the law or our approach.

“These plants are a real problem for the British countryside and we are keen to do what we can to help control their spread and limit the damage they are doing to our environment.”

The wheels of government are notoriously slow but finally, over a century after they arrived, the battle against our alien invaders is gathering pace.

MORE INFORMATION:

www.environment-agency.gov.uk/subjects/conservation/840870/840894/840941/?version=1&lang=_e

www.netregs.gov.uk/netregs/processes/367839/?lang=_e

Ciara Leeming is a Northwest based freelance journalist who writes regularly for the Big Issue and Manchester Evening News on regeneration and social issues.



Words [Michael Taylor](#)
Photographs [Colin McPherson](#)
and courtesy [Mersey Docks
& Harbour Company](#)



This article should be scratch and sniff. You see, the docks at the mouth of the great River Mersey feed the stomachs of the people of the North of England. The smells of edible oils, cocoa, sugar and grain fill the air. And scrap metal too. It's what happens at the Northwest's largest working dock.

A grand tour – or a cook's tour – reveals not just the history of the port of Liverpool, but also the future of a regional asset that is widely misunderstood and widely unappreciated.

To scousers of a certain vintage, the heyday of the docks was at an indeterminate point at the high watermark of the British Empire, when as many as a hundred ships a day came to port. But ships were much smaller then and getting goods on and off them was labour intensive, slow, and wide open to pilfering. Discharging and reloading 5,000 tonnes of cargo could take a hundred men several weeks. Today, massive container ships are emptied of cargo – 10,000 tonnes – stuffed full again and set back to sea, and all within a tide's ebb and flow. That's why those that work there today tell you that the real heyday is now. The port

handles more UK, non-EU, container traffic than any of the east coast ports, a total of 32 million tonnes a year. The Mersey Docks and Harbour Company itself employs 800 people. But that's the tip of a large iceberg. Beyond that the whole Northwest maritime sector employs 15,000 people across 900 different businesses with a combined turnover of £3 billion a year. It takes in shipping, repairs, warehousing, trucking, law and education.

And now that the Port of Liverpool is owned by Peel, the company that bought the Manchester Ship Canal Company in 1972, it has for the first time brought into common ownership both the port that opened a gateway to the world and the canal that was built to say "stick yer tariffs". And a fine chap called Frank Robotham – he's the director of marketing – puts it like this – "what was once there to divide us, now unites us." Peel in fact owns a huge amount of land on both the Liverpool and Wirral sides of the river, including

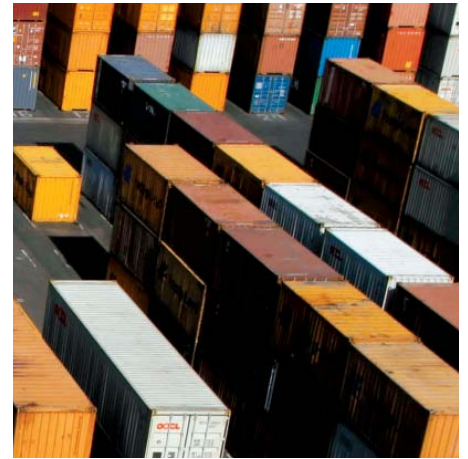
since January the famous Cammell Laird shipyard. Having so many assets in the hands of one company is opening up massive opportunities for regeneration and redevelopment.

So, to understand how the port of Liverpool works our journey has to start at the place it all began – the Port of Liverpool building at the Pier Head, one of the Three Graces. The grandeur of the building represents today what it used to be; an entrance to a major imperial city.

From there I took a trip down the river. I was fortunate to do so on a clear day with just a little wind – not too much – but more of that later. I also got to see the diversity of the modern docks and to take in the profound sense of constant reinvention that you see everywhere. If you took the journey in the

Michael Taylor finds the sweet smell of success at Liverpool's thriving docks.

DOWN TO THE SEA IN SHIPS



Abridged from the upcoming book *Mersey: the river that changed the world*, to be published in November 2007 by Bluecoat Press.



opposite direction you'd see modern docks at the top and decay through the middle. It isn't like that. But then I had a wonderful guide. A lovely man called Eric Leatherbarrow, who used to report on local news on the radio. He still has a warm broadcaster's voice, even though he's now the head of corporate affairs for the docks.

The docks developed in three directions. North, to the sea. South, down the river. And across to Birkenhead, where the dock goes deep into the Wirral peninsula: Norse Merchant Ferries have two services a day to Belfast and Dublin from Birkenhead, with the services busier than ever.

Heading north, Princes Dock is the first you come to. It's all hotels and office buildings now, a story of

waterside regeneration like its nearby cousin the Albert Dock, where Jesse Hartley's famous warehouses are still bringing in the visitors twenty years after their reinvention as a tourist attraction.

Behind a dark red warehouse door are batman costumes and Elvis wigs.

Oh yes, the visitors. There are going to be more of these. The city is paying for a cruise ship landing stage that could enable even the majestic Queen Mary to tie up at the Pier Head. The revenue from cruise ships themselves doesn't amount to much, but those golden oldies in search of a Beatles experience spend a lot. Up to \$100 a day. Welcome all.

You don't see many more of the ships that sailed from the sea until you get to Stanley Dock, close to the tobacco warehouses where they used to lay out floors full of leaves. These vast, impressive warehouses are derelict now. The low ceilings make them hard to develop into apartments.

This is also where the Leeds Liverpool Canal meets the Mersey. And here the walls of the old dock look like battlements, as well they should; French prisoners from the Napoleonic wars built them. Now the walls lead up to the sewage works at Sandon Dock, where United Utilities is doing a sterling job of cleaning up the sewage that once upon a time helped make the river the most polluted in Europe.

A mile or so north and it's safer to take in the air again. The aroma is of a kitchen. This is the edible oils terminal. Huge vats of molasses, palm oil and vegetable oil are stored here. This business is run by the American conglomerate Cargills. Their plant processes domestically grown rapeseed oil, one of the fastest growing crops that British agriculture has to offer. They also have a soya crushing plant.



Stacks of beans ordered by Heinz wait to be baked in Wigan for a nation of bean eaters.

Further up is the place where cane sugar once arrived at the Tate and Lyle sugar dock. The European common market put a stop to all that. Canada Dock is now used for animal feed, another scent to fill the air.

Now let's pause a moment in our tour, because you have to understand what's going on here. You have to understand that where once great fortunes were made, new fortunes are being made all over again. You have to get out and see these new mountains of great fortune with your own eyes. They rise like monuments to our culture. They stand as evidence of our desire to renew, recycle and make good from what we discarded. Ladies and gentlemen, this is scrap metal.

There is more scrap metal processed, shipped out and used to make new things from Liverpool than anywhere else in Britain. There are two companies making a lot of money doing it. S. Norton and European Metals Recycling have invested over £25 million in new facilities in recent years. Between them they export shredded metal all over the world.

Where once great fortunes were made, new fortunes are being made all over again.

The Freeport at Royal Seaforth docks at the mouth of the Mersey isn't much to look at from the ground. It's a secure site that needs certain standards of fencing, security and storage to keep safe the £6 million worth of goods that pass through its gates every week. That standard requires virtually every nook and cranny to be covered by the most extensive CCTV system in the country. It's not only secured by technology, but the port has its own police force, funded by the Mersey Docks

and Harbour Company. Businesses can store goods here without having to declare that they've entered the UK's customs regime. If they're subject to trade tariffs then it can be very handy to release goods from storage at Freeport, to get competitive advantage.

There are acres of storage and stacks of stories behind the harsh metal doors of the thousands of containers and warehouses. Take this one for example: Rubie's Masquerade Company, the New York based maker of party costumes, has taken expanded warehouse space of 24,000 square feet to add to what it first established in 1997. Behind a dark red warehouse door are batman costumes and Elvis wigs. They're made in the Far East and stored here to be sent on to those of an adventurous disposition all over Europe.

The others contain secrets. That's the nature of container shipping. No-one knows what's inside them.

All this isn't just a quirky coincidence. This is as a result of investment, hard work and a slickness in turnaround that is as good an example of efficiency and progress as you'll ever see. The logistics park for the container terminal hadn't had much spent on it during the 1980s. Now, £23 million of investment in new buildings, machinery and the necessary computer technology to log, scan and track goods means the lorry drivers can be in and out through the busy six lane gate within minutes.

Zippering in and out of the containers around the harbour is a busy fleet of 34 straddle

carriers – to load or unload a lorry takes an average of just 45 minutes. "We're the most efficient port in the UK," says Eric Leatherbarrow, with a proud smile. "This is so important, because time is money and some of these truckers could be doing up to four runs a day," he says.

But this isn't just about boats and lorries, there are trains too. The port has five railheads, each dealing with at least three trains a day.



Once the ships come to shore they have to get the stuff off quickly. The longest quay is over a kilometre long but, however many ships are docked there, their cargoes must be brought ashore quickly, or they will miss the outgoing tide. To do this the port has invested £1.5 million in five new



ship-to-shore Noells gantry cranes. That makes all the difference to the captain of an ocean going container ship – twelve hours stuck in dock behind the lock gates is time wasted in the competitive world of modern shipping.

So where does all this stuff come from? Brazil, the Far East, North America, China, the Gulf, South Africa and all over Europe. And where does it all go? It might be easier to ask where it doesn't. Liverpool is the major UK port for trade with North America, with a dozen or more regular weekly sailings. Three new shipping services were added in the first half of 2006; one to Montreal and two to New York. One of these takes Chinook helicopters back for servicing. But you may not be able to know that. It could be classified.

It was a still day when I made my trip – like I said earlier – so standing at the top of the grain store there was no risk of being blown off. From here you can see the range of services sprawling below. The stacks of beans ordered by Heinz, to be baked in Wigan for a nation of bean eaters. Or the special £1.5 million warehouse that provides a temporary home for, amongst other things, cocoa from West Africa bound for Cadbury's chocolate factories in England and Wales.

At the very top of the dock is the future. Plans were approved by the Department of Transport in March to expand the port at Gladstone Dock, at the point where the river has a channel that, at 16 metres, is deep enough to take the vast new container vessels that ply the oceans. These beasts – they call them post-Panamax ships – can carry 15,000 containers. The new port, which will need £80 million of investment, will be able to take two of these behemoths at a time and will have a 17 hectare terminal to cater for the ever increasing traffic in containers.

It's to protect the present and invest in the future – accompanied, no doubt, by a wider, richer mix of smells.

[Michael Taylor is the award-winning editor of the Northwest's leading business magazine, North West Business Insider.](#)

To reserve a copy of *Mersey: the river that changed the world*, contact Matthew Sutcliffe on 0161 242 8208 or email m.sutcliffe@merseybasin.org.uk

As a Mersey pilot, Captain Tony Brand has been guiding ships into dock at Liverpool for almost 20 years.

“Our job is to safely bring ships in and out of the port of Liverpool, from the Liverpool Bar into Liverpool Docks or Birkenhead, up to the Manchester Ship Canal and across the river to Garston.

Climbing the ladder and leaping across [onto the ship] is the most hazardous part, especially during the winter. The challenge is getting the ship into the lock safely without damaging it. We pilot container ships that are 292m by 32m, and we're putting them in a hole only 315m by 39m. Your heart's in your mouth as you approach sometimes, but if everything goes well you feel like a million dollars.

My father's family's been at sea since 1636. My maternal grandfather captained the Queen Elizabeth during the war, and I thought I'd go deep sea all my life. But in 1988, after being made redundant, I joined a small coastal company. The first remark made to me was 'I bet you've only joined us so you can become a pilot'. I'd never considered it before, but the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like a good idea. I wrote to several places and was briefly a pilot on the Thames before returning to Liverpool.

Shortly after I started training, I was on a ship out of Birkenhead. It was a clear, windless evening, and, looking across at the Three Graces all lit up, I remember thinking; 'What a magnificent place to go to work.' There's nothing on the Thames to match it.”



A new leafe

Richard Leafe, Northwest regional director of Natural England, the country's newest agency.

Imagine being able to walk unobstructed around the entire 4,500 km of the English coastline. Anyone who possesses the desire and a stout pair of walking shoes should be able to do just that, says the government's newest agency, Natural England. The agency is calling for legislation that would lead to a £50 million scheme to create a clear and well-managed access corridor around the full length of England's coast.

"We think this approach will be a multiple win – for the environment, for the land managers... and for increased enjoyment of our coastal wildlife and landscapes by the public," said the agency's chair, Sir Martin Doughty. "The principle is clear. The public should have consistent and secure access around their coastline."

In the Northwest, the man ultimately responsible for work on coastal access would be Richard Leafe, Natural England's new regional director. "It's an ambitious programme, but luckily vast lengths of the Northwest coastline are already accessible," says Leafe. Natural England came into being last October, and Leafe has been at the helm in the Northwest since the first day. Its roots go back to November 2003, when Lord Haskins published his influential report into the future of biodiversity and rural issues in England, calling for a far more joined up approach.

"We're righting a wrong that goes back almost 60 years."

The government's response was to merge the old English Nature with parts of the Countryside Agency and the Rural Development Service, creating Natural England. Expectations are high for the new body and there is an eagerness amongst many in the environmental and heritage fields to see if it can deliver on its promise.

Says Leafe: "I take criticism of the earlier organisations squarely on the chin, even as someone who worked for English Nature for many years. There was clearly duplication of what they were doing and they were too focused on the countryside."

"We're righting a wrong that goes back almost 60 years to when the original bodies were first established, splitting apart responsibility for nature conservation and the landscape. Natural England reunites those two

complementary roles into one powerful body."

He goes on: "It creates an organisation with a £500 million budget – we have about ten per cent of that in the region. Most of it goes on payments to farmers for looking after nature and wildlife on their land, but even so it clearly gives us some clout."

The scheme to improve coastal access is typical of what distinguishes Natural England from its predecessors, says Leafe. For one thing, it underlines the agency's broader remit, taking in not just the countryside but coastal, marine and urban environments as well.

It also raises the question of access to green spaces, including the coast, which is one of a number of new issues the agency has been charged with promoting. Others include health and recreation.

Leafe explains that a new project, Steps to Sport, is being pioneered in the Northwest with the aim of tackling health problems, particularly obesity. It's a partnership with Sport England that uses two approaches to get people involved with sport. For those whose last encounter with sport was probably on the school playing field, it aims to open the door and encourage them to get involved again. While for people who have always enjoyed the sporting life but are being forced to slow down, either through injury or age, it helps to find new activities through which they can remain active and involved.

For Leafe and his Northwest team, some of their new responsibilities, such as the call to do more in urban areas, will have profound consequences. In a region with a population of around 7 million, much of it in densely populated urban areas, Natural England will find itself working in places – literally and figuratively – where English Nature feared to tread.

"One of the things we want to do much better is connect people to the natural environment, wherever they live," comments Leafe. "There's already a fantastic green resource in towns and cities, but you need to know where to look."

"Our national target is for every citizen to have a quality green space within five minutes walk of where they live. We now have a £25 million grant scheme called Access to the Local Environment to provide new green spaces and improve existing ones."

"The green infrastructure has been overlooked – it should be planned in from the beginning of projects and developments, the way transport or schools already are."

TURNING POINTS

1987 – graduates from Sheffield University with a degree in geography. Goes on to take a masters degree in geography, also at Sheffield.

1990 – starts his first job, as a tour leader for Explore Worldwide working in Egypt, Israel and the Middle East.

1991 – joins the Nature Conservancy Council as a coastal geomorphologist, covering the whole of the UK.

1996 – becomes European relations manager for English Nature, dealing with European nature organisations and the European Commission, where 70 per cent of environmental legislation originates.

2002 – promoted to regional head of English Nature in the Midlands.

2007 – takes up new post as regional director of Natural England in the Northwest.

Words Jo Birtwhistle

Photograph Orchid Environmental

Waste not, want not.

A Northwest company is to run a £13 million waste processing pilot scheme in Merseyside.

Extracting value from waste. That's the mantra of Adlington-based Orchid Environmental, a company that is in the waste processing, recycling and energy provision markets. Household waste is the company's raw material. Glass, plastic, metal and stone is recovered and recycled, while any biodegradable matter is turned into biofuel using a patented mechanical heat treatment (MHT) technology, developed by Orchid's sister company Fairport Engineering.

Merseyside sends over 80 per cent of its household waste to landfill – one of the lowest recycling rates in the country – and will face fines of up to £30 million in 2009/10 if it fails to comply with European targets for reducing its reliance on landfill. So it's not surprising that the Merseyside Waste Disposal Authority (MWDA) is interested in Orchid's technology and is part-funding the new scheme, which it says could end up helping councils around the country.

Waste is fed into a rotating vessel that spreads the moisture in it around until all the paper it contains is damp. A second processor then treats the waste using a combination of airflow, temperature and moisture. A steam environment is created which breaks down the biodegradable waste, before the temperature in the processor is raised to about 250 degrees to dry out the product. "So the plastic bottles and glass are very clean and what's left looks like shredded fibrous material," explains director Steve Whatmore.

It might be rubbish that's going in at one end but the fibrous material

that comes out the other side is renewable biofuel. The company has developed a biomass density separator to remove all inert material and get this fuel product to client specification. The end result is a high quality biofuel available in a variety of forms from combustible gas, to pellets to bricks that can be used in a wide range of industry sectors.



"We don't just treat the waste and say 'there's a biodegradable product, take it off us'. We only make product that people want," says Whatmore. "In the UK we look at it from the market end – if we can't sell the product it's a waste of time making it so we are looking for energy consumers who want us to produce bio-energy. Then we look to attract the waste stream."

To help meet its targets, the MWDA will use Orchid's technology at a pioneering waste recycling and processing facility in Knowsley, creating up to 23 new jobs. Planning permission was given in March 2007 to convert a furniture storage warehouse on Stretton Way in Huyton Business Park. Building modification and construction of the plant is expected to take until the end of 2007 when waste processing will begin.

The 15-month pilot is funded until April 2009 and the facility, which will feature a visitors learning centre, will process up to 50,000 tonnes of household waste from the area each year. Less than 10,000 tonnes



of that will end up in landfill, saving around £1.5 million a year in waste disposal costs.

Over half of the £13 million facility costs were awarded by the government as part of its New Technology Demonstrator Programme. The project is also being supported by the Northwest Regional Development Agency with £2.1 million of funding. Carl Beer, director of MWDA, says: "The government is supporting this scheme with a lot of money because it believes it has the potential to help councils across the country cut the amount of waste they send to landfill."

If it proves successful then the facility could play a long term role in the future plans for sustainable waste management on Merseyside. Steve Whatmore hopes the technology will also play an important role across the UK and that the pilot will convince other waste disposal authorities of its benefits. "If you have a 50,000 tonne facility operating on Merseyside on a daily basis people can see for themselves how good this technology actually is," he says.

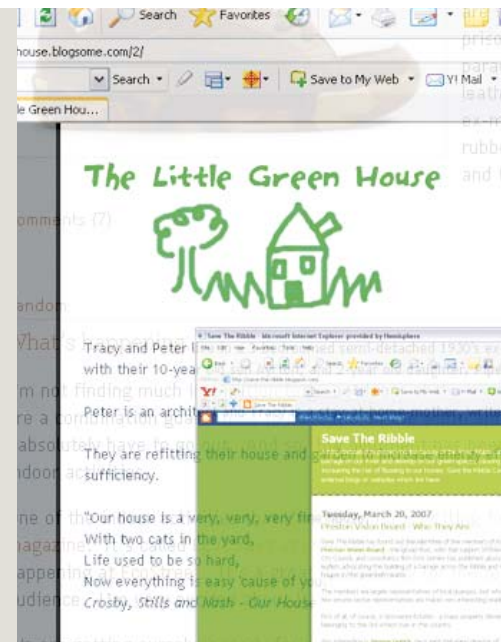
"You have to be tenacious in this industry because we are creating a new solution to the traditional way of dealing with waste."

"More and more local authorities are looking at how they can generate value from the waste stream and that the risks associated with the market place are adequately covered – we've already found a market for the end product," adds Whatmore. "There are a lot of hurdles to overcome so you have to be tenacious in this industry because we are creating a new solution as an alternative to what has been the traditional way of dealing with waste."

Joanne Birtwhistle is a journalist for North West Business Insider magazine.

THE KEYBOARD IS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Thanks to blogs, any environmental campaign can now be fuelled by the vast power of the internet.



If you've got a bee in your bonnet about something, what do you usually do? Let off steam down the pub, chew it over with your partner, write a letter to the paper, harangue your MP, or fume furiously in private?

Well, you might have done any or all of these in the past, but if you're going to move with the times, setting up a blog is now where it's at. Whether it's "Disgusted of Stockton Heath" getting cross about dog poo on pavements, or a primary school class demanding that the council impose a 30-mile an hour speed limit outside their school, launching your issue into cyberspace via a weblog – or in its shortened form, a 'blog' – is now de rigeur as the way for active citizens to air their views.

There are literally millions of blogs out there, ranging in quality from inspiring and compelling to self-indulgent and dull. Many are set up by individuals who simply want to chronicle the minutiae of their daily lives, and most, frankly, lie at the poorer end of the quality scale. But a good blog can be a powerful way to get your opinion across, and if you have an issue you want to protest about, blogging is a way of reaching an audience bigger than you could ever imagine.

Green issues are no exception: greenmummy.blogspot.com and littlegreenhouse.blogspot.com are just two examples of blogs set up by ordinary people who want to bring up their babies and live their lives in a more eco-friendly way. Environmental journalist George Monbiot has a much-visited blog and international charities such as Greenpeace run their own highly successful campaigning blogs that get hits from all over the world.

It's caught on fast because it's simple. A blog is basically a website that you create, name, and post your views on as often as you like. You can offer a facility whereby anyone who reads the blog can comment on what you've said. And blogs can include photos,

drawings, audio and film. The very essence of a blog however is that it's absolutely up to the minute, which gives readers a reason to keep coming back to see what happens as the "story" progresses.

One of the UK's most successful green blogs was started by activists in Lancashire who formed the Save the Ribble campaign. Initially anxious about the technicalities of setting up a blog, Jane Brunning, who describes herself modestly as a "complete techno-prat", was reassured by a colleague that the group could use www.blogger.com, which is entirely free.

"Blogging is all about free speech and democracy, giving power to voices that have previously been ignored – it is a tool that no campaign should be without."

"Basically you just set up an account, choose a template, make your first post and you're away," explains Max Lorraine, one of the four founder members of the Save the Ribble campaign.

"You can choose how easy it is for people to post comments and you can invite other people to become posters to your blog. We've involved local people who are interested

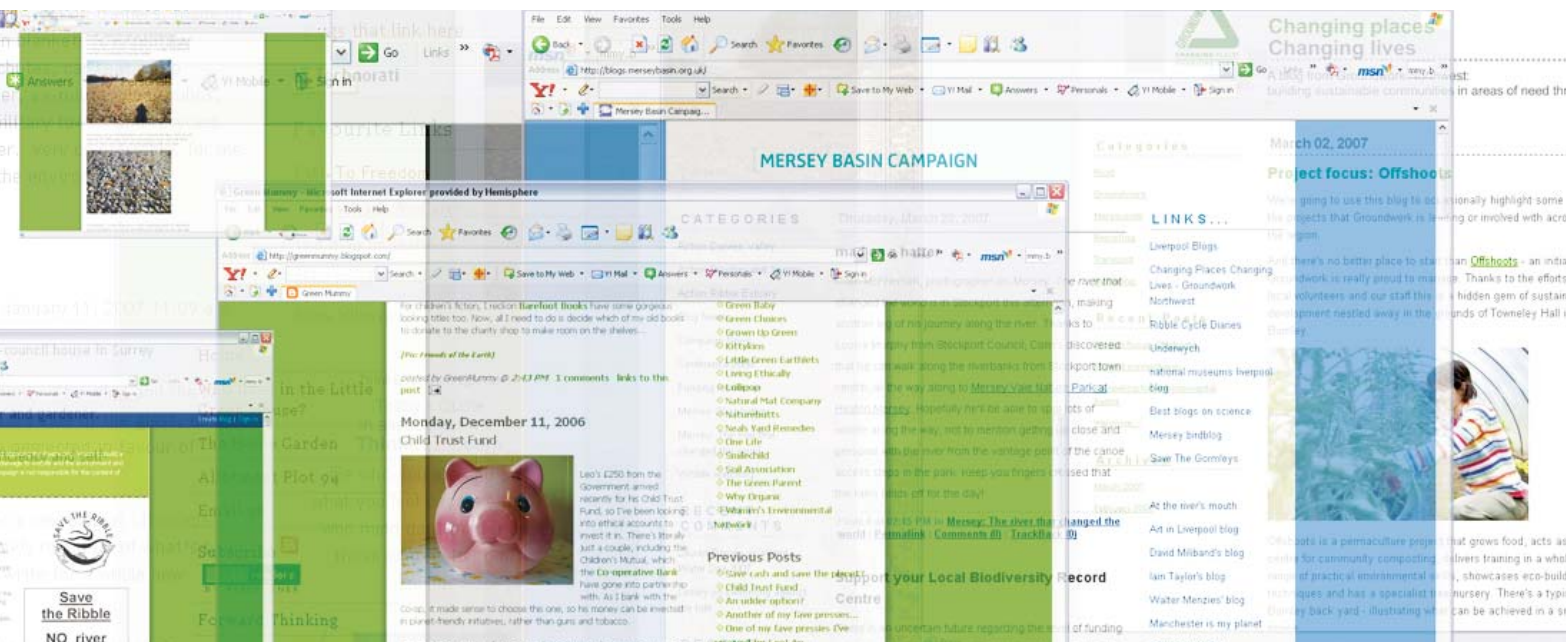
in protecting the environment, allotment keepers, fishermen and birdwatchers: none of us are brilliant at computing, but we find it reasonably easy to post."

The Save The Ribble blog gets around 2,000 hits a month and recently came thirteenth in a survey of the UK's most popular green blogs. What is it that makes it so compelling?

"We treat it like a magazine," says Jane Brunning, "and make a commitment to upload at least two new articles every week so that people keep coming back. That's really crucial. Plenty of people out there don't keep their blogs up to date, but that's fatal. And it's got to be interesting. There are a lot of blogs where people are just rambling on, which is tedious."

A successful blog requires a clear issue – a specific theme that makes it different from all the others. Late last year Sefton Council provoked a public outcry when it ordered the removal from Crosby beach of the 100 iron men that make up artist Antony Gormley's Another Place. Within 24 hours several blogs appeared to fight the decision.

One was started by Kate Fox, new media co-ordinator at the Mersey Basin Campaign. "The blog received comments from around the world. It enabled us to respond



quickly to an unfolding situation, and to gauge public opinion about the issue. We've gone on to set up other blogs and they turn our website from a source of information into an electronic conversation."

For Save The Ribble, the local council's Riverworks proposals to develop the waterside in Preston is the issue. The campaigners argue the plans will threaten wildlife, destroy green space and leave homes vulnerable to flooding. By creating a completely open forum they've ensured that their blog is read by all sides of the argument.

"Our blog has become a way that local people can clearly express their views, and be listened to, whereas local councils have tended to sideline and ignore them," explains Max Lorraine. "This diversity of viewpoints, along with photographs and up to the minute news – we often post photographs of events within a couple of hours of them happening – makes our blog a very compelling read."

The efficiency of a blog as compared to a traditional campaign is remarkable, both in terms of the speed and the massive reach of the internet – as long as you can get people to visit your site.

The best way to get traffic to your blog is to link to other blogs that you find enjoyable, or that discuss topics

related to your own area of interest. Often fellow bloggers will link back to you, and it's easy to see how a community of like-minded people is created.

There are pitfalls to be avoided though, and the scariest of those is the danger of libel. Just because something is published on the web does not mean it is exempt from the libel laws: fall foul of these and it can be an expensive day in court.

Libel is a particular bugbear of course when there's a hot issue under debate: it is all too easy to fall into exactly this trap when readers post their responses to information they've read on a blog.

"When people feel that their homes are being put at increased risk of flooding...they can get very angry," notes Max Lorraine.

To protect your blog – and your campaign – he says, it's important to ensure that you don't post any statement that can't be backed up by evidence. It is also good practice to screen all comments before they go up on the site.

Libel aside, the benefits of blogging are many and powerful. It's an unrivalled way of providing current news and facts about your topic of interest, it enables you to respond almost instantly to events, and means you can put forward arguments in a way that can be heard locally, nationally and internationally.

"People who previously could take hugely important decisions affecting our environment and our lives without much scrutiny from local people are finding that they are now being held to account much more publicly and democratically – something a lot of them feel

really uncomfortable about!" Lorraine points out.

"Blogging is all about free speech and democracy, giving power to voices that have previously been ignored – it is a tool that no campaign should be without."

BLOGGING FOR BEGINNERS

There are now roughly 50 million blogs in the world. In the time it takes you to read this sentence several more will have appeared – one is created every second.

The word 'blog' is a shortening of the word web-log: literally, an online log or diary.

Blogs have caught on with incredible speed because they are free, easy to set up and use, allow readers to post comments, and can be linked together into communities.

There a few golden rules for campaigning blogs: have a clear issue you want to talk about; update the blog regularly; report any new developments promptly; use photographs; invite people to leave comments; build a community by linking to similar blogs; beware of the libel laws; and, not least, remember that the blog is just one tool in a armoury. You still have to go to meetings, organise events and talk to the local press.

TRY THESE

<http://greenmummy.blogspot.com>
<http://littlegreenhouse.blogsome.com>
<http://save-the-ribble.blogspot.com>
<http://blogs.merseybasin.org.uk>

SEIZING THE DAY

This spring the Environment Agency teamed up with the Northwest's water company, United Utilities, to launch a campaign warning of the link between climate change and water resources. It aims to encourage people to get into the habit of using less water, which means reversing the current long-term trend towards using more and more.

The link between water and climate change is two-fold. Firstly, climate change experts predict that changing weather patterns in the Northwest will mean more winter floods but drier summers, putting pressure on our water resources. And secondly, it takes a lot of energy to process the water we use – the water industry uses about three per cent of all the energy consumed in the UK. If it comes from burning fossil fuels, then producing all that energy is releasing carbon dioxide.

But climate change can often feel like a problem that is simply overwhelming. We expect governments and institutions to take action on our behalf, or we're unsure of exactly what we can do on as individuals.

So Source has been out about in the region talking to the trendsetters who are ahead of the curve. We found them everywhere from Manchester to the Lake District, self-employed and working for multi-national corporations, and ranging from chief executives to artists.



Janette Porter Artist

"Art Cargo consists of 19 hessian sacks hung on six washing lines across a working warehouse at Garston Docks in Liverpool, along with six rows of 19 sacks on the ground. The sacks are part of the history of the waterfront. They had lain unused for 20 years but before that had been carefully and beautifully repaired many times.

I created Art Cargo last year for the Living at the Edge project, or L@tE. The project's website is the hub for an international series of art works looking at how communities that live on the water's edge are coping with climate change. Other pieces are in Russia, Croatia, Cornwall and the Fens.

The dockers told me that winters are rainier but not as cold as they used to be. They are physically feeling how climate change is affecting their work.

Climate change is something that small communities around the world are dealing with. It's not just the big stories. It is about listening to people, working creatively with communities and sharing information at a global level.

I don't think artists can find the solution to climate change, but communities can. What artists need to do is identify communities struggling with climate change and offer them projects, not ready-made packages."

www.lateexchange.com

The everyday heroes already fighting climate change.

Dr Kevin Anderson
Research Director
Tyndall Centre for Climate
Change Research

“As I see it there are two main areas where we need to do further research. The first is less about designing new technologies to get us out of this climate change hole, and more about developing the means by which we can rapidly increase the uptake of existing low-carbon technologies. Why is it that we’re not making more of the easy technological wins that will allow us to achieve the urgent and radical cuts in CO2 emissions we need to make? We’ve moved on from prioritising the hard science of climate change itself, now we to look into the social science of why we behave the way we do and how we can break the cycle of high energy and high carbon living.

The second area we need to focus on is closing the disjuncture between the science of climate change and the politics of climate change. Even in the UK, which in many ways is leading the international community, we are still not grasping the nettle of the scale of the problem. For example, the carbon targets within the draft Climate Change Bill are completely out of synch with what the science is telling us we need to do. We need to make the politics of climate change more evidence based.”



Liz Thompson
Environmental Adviser
Co-operative Group

“It’s been about a decade now that I’ve been seriously interested in environmental matters. It was an area the bank was moving into through its ethical policy, and becoming a parent also had a big influence.

Personally, it’s involved making more conscious choices. Recycling at home, buying green electricity, composting; we do all that. My job gives me the opportunity to research into ways of combating climate change and so you become more aware of the various options. Once you’re aware, it makes complete sense: when we replace white goods it’s with A-rated appliances for instance.

Having children has made it all much more fun, and making them aware of the impact of their actions is part of it. You lead by example.

As a business, I know that our efforts to reduce CO2 emissions help to attract both customers and staff.

Before we took action as a group, we had to measure where we were starting from. We looked at how much power we used, as well as our transport habits and the amount of waste we produced. Over time we’ve switched to renewable energy (virtually all our energy – 98 per cent – is now renewable), encouraged the use of video-conferencing to cut down on travelling, and have put a recycling structure in place throughout the business.

We’ve also supported on-site renewable energy generation – we have a wind farm on Co-operative-owned land in Cambridgeshire, over 7,000 solar panels covering the CIS tower in Manchester (the biggest solar energy project in the UK) and micro-wind turbines on another of our properties in Manchester. We’re also investing in renewable energy in schools in a new project worth £1.5 million.

There’s a lot left to do: food miles is an area needing further attention, and as waste is a key issue for us we’re also working on a new programme to minimise packaging. Should we be selling incandescent light bulbs? We’re working on that too.

I do worry that as a society we’re not doing enough, and I find it strange that you still talk to people who don’t think it’s their problem. But I believe that you have to take action.

As a business we’ve set ourselves energy savings targets of twenty per cent by 2010 and twenty-five per cent by 2012. The biggest CO2 saving we’ve made so far is undoubtedly through our purchase of renewable energy – that saves approximately 300,000 tonnes a year.

At home, the kids are so into it now that it’s become part of our lifestyle.”



Danny Frost
Furniture maker and timber supplier
Cumbria

“I’ve been in the furniture making business for fifteen years and respecting the environment has always mattered enormously to me. We don’t tolerate any waste products and try to find a home for every offcut of wood, even if it’s used for charcoal, which we make ourselves. Recently we planted a thousand trees for every year we’ve been in business. It’s all native broadleaf. We’ve put some on our own land and if anybody wants to plant trees in their garden or field, we buy the saplings and give them away. I think of it as restocking nature’s shelves.

We get ninety-nine per cent of our wood from within Cumbria which avoids fuel miles spent in transporting logs halfway across the world. We only use trees that have been felled for good reason, or trees that are standing dead if they’re in good enough nick. Local farmers who know us will give us a ring when a tree’s found blown over on their land as well, and so we get to use all the native hardwoods: oak, beech, sycamore, ash. There are even a few pockets of elms left in Cumbria that we manage to source sometimes. It’d be far cheaper to buy in wagonloads of timber from Eastern Europe, which is what the sawmills use, but that doesn’t make much sense to me.

Over the years we’ve tried to do more. We built our own kiln a couple of years ago that is partly powered by solar energy.

Whereas most commercial mills shove green wood straight into the kiln to dry it out fast, we air-dry ours for three years and only use the kiln to extract the last little bit of moisture. We have to have a Land Rover for the business, but we cycle around a lot and made a decision to use a motorbike for anything that didn’t involve heavy loads: it’s more fuel efficient and a lot more fun!

The next project is installing a big wind turbine on our site. It’ll cost around £40,000, which is a huge financial commitment for the business and the payback time is looking like 15-20 years. But we do this stuff because we want to, and increasingly we’re seeing that our customers who commission us to do corporate work or create individual pieces for their homes really value it.

The most irritating part of trying to be environmentally friendly is fighting against regulations that don’t make sense. Some of the timber we use is from sustainable forests and gets the FSC label, but with trees that have blown over or if we use a tree that’s already dead, the rules say we can’t get the accreditation. And I think using that kind of salvaged timber is all about being creative with the resources that we’ve got: I don’t want to lower my standards to FSC criteria, I want to be more sustainable than that.”

www.dannyfrost.co.uk

Anne Selby
Chief Executive
Wildlife Trust for Manchester,
Lancashire and North Merseyside

“We had the opportunity to build our new headquarters from scratch, and wanted to practice what we preach in terms of sustainability. So we used reclaimed brick and slate, sustainable timber, solar panels for heating our water, and we’ve a wood-chip boiler and use recycled rainwater. The building’s low thermal mass means it holds heat in. It’s not completely carbon neutral, but it’s a pretty good effort.

Though our build was underpinned by strong sustainability principles, it cost the same as a standard office building. If you’re prepared to do your research in the planning stages, a sustainable office doesn’t have to be expensive. In the long term, the energy and maintenance costs will be lower too.”

Adrian Davison
Group Energy Manager
United Utilities

“The water industry is here forever so we have to look long term. Combined heat and power (CHP) units are great for us because they reduce both our carbon emissions and our electricity bill. They really are zero carbon because we can run them on biogas produced from sewage.

In the last few years we’ve spent £25 million either replacing old units with newer ones or installing units at new sites. Now we have them at 23 sites, generating about 140,000MWh of electricity per year. The new units are about 50 per cent more efficient than the ones from the 1990s and we’re looking at about a four year payback period.

As well as biogas-fired CHP we also run six hydropower schemes and in April we started buying 25 per cent of our electricity from certified renewable sources. We’ve made a decision to do that for at least the next three years, which is a major commitment. We’re also carrying out research into using biofuels and wind turbines.”



Fiona Pelham
Event organiser
Organise This

“Organise This is an events management company that plans events in a way that is environmentally friendly and involves the community.

The events industry is traditionally not very sustainable. Think of the emissions produced by everyone travelling to the event, the waste paper and the food waste, and the energy used by lighting, audio-visual equipment and heating or air conditioning.

We go through exactly the same steps as any other event management company, except that at every stage we consider the environmental and social impacts. So when we do our site visit, we talk to the venue about waste reduction and recycling, or about using local caterers to reduce food miles. At a recent event in Preston we persuaded 70 per cent of delegates to travel by public transport (the remaining emissions were offset), most of the food was locally sourced and all the food waste was composted. We also do a lot of measurements so we can produce a report for the client.

I also do a lot of speaking around the world to try and spread the message. This summer I've been asked to address an international conference in Montreal and I've also presented to the Green Meetings Industry Council.

Organise This has been going since 2004 and at first it was hard work – people just weren't interested. But now it's a positive advantage because people have suddenly begun to understand how important the issues are. Delegates themselves are demanding to see action on them.”

www.organisethis.co.uk

David Broadbent
Regional Chair North West
Persimmon Homes

“One of the hottest questions in construction at the moment is how we can make homes that are more environmentally friendly. One of the ways Persimmon is trying to answer that question is with our Living-i project in Irlam, Manchester.

There are five different houses in the project - each one is a unique trial home that uses a different range of construction methods and materials, and the latest in home technologies. From the outside the homes look like an ordinary house that you can imagine yourself living in, but each one has been looked at with fresh eyes from the foundations upwards and the outside in, with every element extensively researched. So we can use these five homes to assess various building techniques and materials for the future.

One of the properties is a detached timber-framed 'Eco-home' that has been constructed to achieve a very high Eco Homes rating. All components are focused on energy saving and sustainable products.

Another is a detached steel-framed property known as the 'techno home' because it focuses on hi-tech products and cutting edge technological, communications and security systems. It also uses a number of off-site manufacturing techniques.

There's also a pair of semi-detached properties that are known as the 'lifetime home' and the 'modular home'. The lifetime home has a basement and third floor, which allows for growth and adapts as the needs of the family living in it change.

Both use off-site manufacturing processes and modular construction because it's one way around the industry's skills shortage, and because it's in line with the government's drive for sustainability. So, for example, the modular home is constructed using off-site concrete manufacturing processes, which minimises waste, transportation and contamination on site. It'll also include wireless control technology.

The final property is constructed using the Space4 insulated timber frame system, which is one of the most efficient and energy saving systems on the market. We're testing the Space4 system as part of our drive to achieve the government's target of zero carbon homes by 2016.

House builders are waking up to the threat of climate change, and we're also facing more and more green legislation, so the industry is working hard to change the way we build for a greener future.”



Count me IN!

Source talks to Joe Feeley of IN Environmental Services – a community-based social enterprise that employs local people and ex-offenders to clean and green grot-spots and open spaces across Merseyside.



Q How did IN Environmental Services get started? The project began in 2002 in Liverpool 8. It aimed to fill the gap in street cleansing left by mainstream service providers; to work on the sites they're not obliged to deal with – such as grot-spots where the landowner is absent. We wanted to bring back confidence and belief in the Dingle. A lot of short-term schemes had come here, only for green spaces to revert to dereliction when the money ran out.

Q How did you personally get involved? Gerard Murden, INclude Neighbourhood Regeneration's managing director, held a series of community forums explaining what INclude would bring to Liverpool 8. The burning question for most residents was 'what's happening with street cleaning and fly-tipping?' It didn't matter if you built the Fourth Grace in Liverpool 8, people were more concerned about the state of the streets.

My name kept popping up because I was both a local lad and the council's environmental lead officer, responsible for street cleansing, refuse collection and ground maintenance. Gerard Murden put his vision to me, a 35-year plan to regenerate Liverpool 8. He asked me to run a three-man operation in parallel with my council job – which was great for me, a hit squad to solve my problem areas.

Q Where does your workforce come from? We employ local people aged 18-26. In the Dingle, many of that age group can't read or write, or have a criminal background, but that doesn't detract from what they can do if they're given

responsibility. With the type of work we do, they can learn the skills as they go along. Our only requirement is that they're local and they're keen. We recruit through word of mouth, if communities know someone who fits the bill, we'll interview them. My focus is on getting people on the first rung of the ladder and building their confidence.

Q How does your training programme work? Trainees work here for up to a year, gaining skills in all forms of horticulture. They know that if they're shining like a star early on they can be promoted to supervisor, or plucked out for permanent employment. We act as a 'feeder club' for mainstream service providers in the area, who know that our trainees have the right attitude for work. We start work at 8:30am, but most lads are here at ten to eight.

Recently we've expanded to cover other parts of the city and beyond. We've recruited locally, and brought those people to Liverpool 8 to train them up to our standards. We'll swap them back one by one, until we've got all local people working in their own areas.

Q Why is it so important to you to employ a local workforce? If you have familiar local faces in the crew, they're less likely to be targeted by undesirables. If my team are out in the evening and see a would-be fly tipper going to one of our sites, they're straight over to say 'Whoa, we don't accept fly tipping here', because they know they'll have to clean it up tomorrow! They end up policing the area in the evenings. People tend to respect an area if it's maintained and cleaned regularly.

Q What's been your biggest success story? Some of our trainees come here with quite a reputation. One lad looked very familiar to me. I know lots of people round here, but there was no connection. After the interview I asked where I recognised him from. He was shy and reluctant to talk to me, his chin firmly on his chest, looking through his eyebrows, and he said 'I was on the front page of the Echo the other night with an ASBO'. He's now in my top three workers, one of the people I have standing up in front of an audience talking about our work. He's a professional who can make decisions and take responsibility. It's a huge buzz to see someone blossom like that.

Q What's the best thing about your job? Helping to turn people's lives around, and being in the privileged position of having a say in how this area – where my family and friends live – has changed for the better.

Recently we've expanded to other parts of Liverpool, the Wirral, Sefton and Southport, and we're looking after Speke & Garston Coastal Reserve. The chance to make an impact along that waterfront is the bee's knees of my career. People may try to thwart us, but each and every day we go out we put in 100 per cent effort.





Kevin Gopal is a freelance journalist based in Manchester. He has written regular columns on politics and regional affairs for various publications and is currently acting editor of the Big Issue in the North.

MONEY GAMES

Opinion: London's 2012 Olympics will suck up public funding while little benefit makes its way up the M6 to the Northwest, says Kevin Gopal.

In a way we should be pleased at reports that the cost of the 2012 London Olympics has spiralled to £9 billion. The bigger the budget the more cash is available for Northwest businesses bidding for contracts.

If that sounds a bit barmy, remember this is trickledown economics we're talking about. It's a concept that doesn't look any less flaky now than it did when Ronald Reagan tried unsuccessfully to run the US on it in the early 1980s.

The idea that jobs and wealth will come trickling out of East London for the rest of the country needs to be treated with some skepticism. Some Northwest companies are likely to pick up contracts – and when they do they'll be able to charge top dollar for getting the job done on time – but a bonanza there won't be.

More concerning for the moment is what the mushrooming cost of the games might mean for the rest of the country. The figure of £9 billion, put together by BBC sports editor Mihir Bose, is more than three times the original estimate. The London Evening Standard already puts the figure at £10 billion. That's to pay for just 16 days of sport, you understand.

Whatever the current guesstimate, for a massive public sector – or indeed private sector – project to exceed cost estimates is nothing

new. But the fear remains that with five years to go there is yet more room for over-runs, slippages and other cock-ups. Certainly, Gordon Brown has little faith in his own government's ability to pull off the games, as his insistence on building a £2.7 billion contingency fund into the costs reveals. And who can blame him after last year's fiasco, when Whitehall discovered it had forgotten to include the VAT on the costs of building for the games? Sir Humphrey obviously doesn't carry cash, don't you know?

Corporate troubleshooter David James – now Lord James of Blackheath – is another to have doubts about the games. The man who was brought in by the government to try to salvage something from the Millennium Dome debacle has warned that the London Olympics risk being “a complete and utter disaster”.

Speaking in the Lords, he offered two main warnings to the government – guard against the inappropriate use of management consultants and make sure sponsors are locked in early. Consultants, he said, were “like the leaves that regularly stop our railway trains in bad weather – they are the wrong consultants in the main”. And if, like the Dome, the Olympics fail to attract the anticipated level of sponsorship, the loss of income could add half a billion on to the costs.

The danger for the Northwest is that the spiraling costs of the games in London will be paid for with cuts in public spending elsewhere, while thereafter the capital's expensive Olympic facilities – as in Athens and Sydney in previous years – lie under-used. Some suspect it has already happened, with

Merseyside's tram system one of the alleged victims. Others question whether there will be any money available in the future for the likes of the Lowry arts centre in Salford if the government raids Lottery funds to pay for growing Olympics costs.

The London Olympics “will be a catastrophe for Northern economies, with no benefits at all”, says Graham Stringer, MP for Manchester Blackley and a member of the Commons Transport Select Committee. He warns that cuts in public spending for the North have already started, particularly transport spending, in which the Southeast's share “has already increased and it looks like that will intensify”.

Health secretary Patricia Hewitt has been forced to make cuts in the NHS to bring her budget back on track. “Why is there a different rule for the Olympic Games?” asks Stringer.

The Northwest Regional Development Agency disagrees, arguing that there are huge opportunities for the region's businesses from the Olympics, not only in contracting but also in tourism. We shouldn't be too surprised – this is a government body and one paid for a degree of professional optimism. Even so, there is truth in the admonition that the games are going ahead anyway and it's up to us to make the most of them.

And who knows – the Olympic authorities might learn the lessons from Manchester's successful Commonwealth Games and pull off a blinder. Remember, one of the members of the Olympic Delivery Authority is a certain chief executive of Manchester City Council, Sir Howard Bernstein.



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