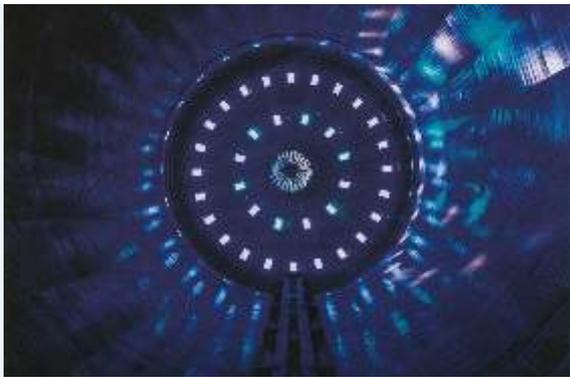


GERMAN

Emscher regional park in Germany proves that size, ambition
and imagination can be inspirational qualities.



FOR INSPIRATION



GASOMETER OBERHAUSEN &
HALDE BECKSTRASSE, BOTTRUP

The youths clambering in and around the gasometers and foundries on a huge tract of formerly industrial land in Germany's Ruhr region are not trespassing vandals. They are visitors to the world's most famous regional park.

Emscher Park, opened in 1989, is a bold attempt to re-use one of the largest industrial wastelands in the world. Built on ecological principles, the park offers a range of high quality recreation facilities for local people and tourists, as well as housing and offices.

And rather than attempting to erase the past, the authorities have used adventurous architecture to transform the gasometers and chimneys into working industrial monuments. The 12-storey Oberhausen gasometer is now a space for cultural events; another has become a diving school. And what was once a coalmine, coking plant and foundry is a leisure area with hiking trails and climbing walls. The park runs along nearly 60km of the River Emscher, an area that was the heart of Germany's economic miracle in the 1950s and 1960s but which had begun to decline in the 1970s, leaving massive areas of brownfield land scattered with disused industrial buildings. It's no surprise then that the regional park concept is held up as a solution for parts of England's Northwest – but it's possibly more of a surprise to find we already have them.

Two are already in operation and there are a further seven proposals on the table. With the Northwest Regional Development Agency (NWDA) having commissioned further

studies into the proposals, and the North West Regional Assembly (NWRA) beginning to work on a strategy, regional parks are looking like an idea whose time has come. It's been nearly six years in gestation. Ian Wray, NWDA chief planner, says: "The idea was born in the 1999 regional economic strategy, which identified the need to take forward large-scale environmental projects that would benefit recreation and regeneration and have a good effect on the region's image."

Despite the opaque language used to describe regional parks – "strategic projects designed to create and manage a range of new regional park resources" – the definition was deliberately open-ended, allowing a variety of different proposals to emerge as long as they combined environmental and economic benefits close to urban areas. The first two to receive funding, East Lancashire Regional Park and Mersey Waterfront, both aspire to the long term and high quality nature of Emscher Park, but they are very different from the German flagship and from each other.

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East Lancashire Regional Park, established in 2000, encompasses the districts of Ribble Valley, Pendle, Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley, Rossendale and Hyndburn. It has a population of over 500,000 – equivalent to a small city but based in a series of towns. With initial funding of £5 million from the NWDA, and a further £18 million from other public and private sector sources, the aim has been to give this city-sized population the centre that it has been missing. Chris Henshall of the Lancashire Economic Partnership (LEP), lead organisation for the park, says the idea of a regional park was being developed locally at the same time as it was emerging from the NWDA.

“We have fantastic landscapes, important industrial heritage and towns with character that have direct access to the countryside – the countryside comes into the towns.

“The aim has been to create a recognised heart for East Lancashire in a broad band of urban fringe around the towns.”

The priority has been to create a network of routes for walkers, cyclists and horseriders, based on existing paths, so that residents and tourists alike can make full use of the park.

Other activities in the first stage of the programme, which runs until 2007, are the reclamation of derelict land, woodland creation – the benefits of which will not be seen for 10-15 years – and a series of community projects.

Already the park is beginning to deliver some of the economic outputs demanded of it.

But it is the park’s Panopticons scheme that has drawn the most attention.

The Panopticons project manager, Pennine Arts, has been inviting bids to build a series of six landmarks for the twenty-first century in the Lancashire hills as “symbols of the area’s regeneration and pride”. The scheme follows the Emscher Park blueprint for high quality, distinctive design. The winning proposal for Hyndburn, for instance, is HIGH-form, by architect Peter Beard, consisting of five circular earth banks arranged in concentric rings. The formation is covered with a mix of local grasses and heathers and the furrows have been designed to catch rainwater and promote the growth of wetland grasses and associated fauna.

Equally dramatic are the projects planned for the Mersey Waterfront, the second regional park to be set up in the Northwest, with £8.8 million from the NWDA and, more recently, £13.25 million from the Objective One programme for the poorest parts of the EU.

Mersey Waterfront’s area covers roughly 140km of diverse maritime environment from Wirral to Halton to Liverpool to Sefton. As well as beaches, dunes, coastal woodlands, promenades, coastal marshes, golf clubs, sailing clubs, sand flats, marine lakes and working docks, it also covers the world-famous Liverpool city waterfront – now a World Heritage Site. Less well known is the fact that 90 per cent of the Mersey waterfront area is internationally important for nature conservation.

It took a visit by UK, US and Canadian experts from the International Countryside Exchange to help crystallise the potential of Merseyside’s leisure and tourism attractions, explains Louise Hopkins, Mersey Waterfront’s director.

“They came with a totally open mind and found that the gems were there in sufficient number and critical mass to create a powerful regional park but were under-used, neglected and not necessarily recognised as gems by the local population or tourists.”



TOP THE WEAVER VALLEY IN CHESHIRE:
AN AERIAL VIEW, DUTTON LOCKS AND
ANDERTON BOAT LIFT
BOTTOM ZECHE NORDSTERN, GELSENKIRCHEN
– PART OF EMSCHER PARK

The regional park and Merseyside's bio-manufacturing centre were the two big ideas put forward for NWDA funding by partners in Merseyside.

Mersey Waterfront's challenge, says Hopkins, was "to improve the quality and connect the gems so that people understood they form a much bigger whole."

As with the East Lancashire Regional Park, which also crosses over local authority boundaries but had the benefit of the LEP to guide it, Mersey Waterfront has been spearheaded by the Mersey Partnership, a public-private partnership that counts all of the area's councils among its members. "The Mersey Partnership helped make the idea of regional parks credible with the NWDA, not least because it's the economic voice of Merseyside," says Hopkins. "The fact that we have a clear economic focus in our proposals whereas other regional parks are more environment-led has, I suspect, allowed us to move more quickly."

To build up credibility and demonstrate the range of activities possible, Mersey Waterfront, now nearly three years old, has largely concentrated on smaller projects, leaving flagship schemes until later. "From a new scrape at Marshside bird reserve to a major contribution to a cruise liner facility at Pier Head, they are real extremes but all about promoting the surprising value and diverse use of the waterfront," says Hopkins.

A maintenance team for the Halton waterfront not only cleans up litter and repairs vandalism but also carries out small-scale capital projects and provides help and information to visitors. People's panels shape the regional park programme. Both are evidence of the emphasis the Mersey Waterfront team is placing on securing the support of local people. This is not only because it is crucial in its own right. "If you are trying to attract new business, investment and tourism and the local people don't respect and cherish it, you are on a hiding to nothing," says Hopkins. "Merseyside people already have an incredible affiliation with the waterfront. If we can build on that Mersey Waterfront will go from strength to strength."

The next phase of the park will include a rolling programme of investment in the promenades at Otterspool and Egremont, on opposite banks of the Mersey, to bring them into the twenty-first century and up to international standards. This will be complemented by investment in the open spaces between and beyond the proms and into the areas of open coast.

In the meantime, Hopkins has some advice for the backers of other regional parks: get the right backing from a broad church of organisations; make very clear the economic benefits; get a strong governance structure in place; and have a very clear sense of place that people can understand.

The NWDA is giving support in principle to a further three proposals, which have been the subject of feasibility studies North West Coastal Trail, Ribble Estuary and Weaver Valley Regional Park. It also considers four more proposals to be of interest and has commissioned consultants to study them further – Morecambe Bay, Cumbria and the Furness Coast, Greenheart in Wigan, and Croal-Irwell. The NWRA is about to draw up an overarching framework for regional park development in three areas – the Northwest coast, the Mersey belt and East Lancashire. And the government's recently launched Northern Way strategy emphasises "green infrastructure" – the role that the spaces between the North's towns and cities can play in promoting economic and social

benefits. Backers of the regional parks have real reason to believe their plans will come to fruition.

The North West Coastal Trail would fill in the gaps in existing paths and facilities to create a route running from Chester to Carlisle; Ribble Estuary is based on the area's international designation as an important site for migrating and wintering birds. Morecambe Bay and Cumbria and the Furness Coast both would provide an alternative to more crowded Lakeland area. Greenheart, entirely within the Wigan area and based on the Wigan and Pennington flashes, is making progress even without the designation of a regional park. Supporters of Croal-Irwell, such as Nigel Blandford of the Red Rose Forest, likewise believe their proposal "stacks up by any other method."

Arguably the most distinctive proposal is the Weaver Valley Regional Park, which is based on Cheshire's industrial legacy as a centre for salt extraction and processing dating back to pre-Roman times. The Weaver, Dane and Wheelock valleys have a unique combination of waterways, archaeological remains, subsidence flashes, waste tips and cultural heritage. A park running for 25 miles down the centre of Cheshire from Runcorn to Crewe, say its backers, would support regeneration in and around the area's seven towns and promote tourism and recreation.

The scale of Cheshire's salt industry in the Weaver is unique in the UK – "a regional asset of enormous economic, recreational and educational potential that has yet to be realised," according to Ian Dale of Cheshire County Council, who is leading the Weaver Valley project. One of the ways the regional park proposals would make more of the area's distinctive history would be by rescuing the Lion Salt Works, which recently featured on the BBC's Restoration programme. A heritage trail running through the park would link important sites from the area's salt producing past in Middlewich, Nantwich, Northwich, Winsford and Frodsham.

An extensive network of canals was built in the Weaver Valley in the eighteenth century to enable ocean-going boats to import coal and export salt. Now there is an opportunity to link the navigable canals, owned and managed by British Waterways, to other canals and waterways, and also to address poor water quality in the lower part of the River Weaver. Opening up the waterways will also be a major part of the regeneration of local towns, boosting their potential for tourism.

The reclamation of derelict land will aid the process of regeneration and there is the potential to create new woodland and green space outside the towns, adding to the bio-diversity of the area.

The Weaver Park proposals also include improvements to transport and access, such as better routes for walkers, cyclists and horse riders south of Winsford and around Crewe and completion of the Weaver Valley cycleway. Improved bus and rail services will encourage more use of public transport. Dale and his colleagues are patient. The regional park plans complement a number of existing regeneration and funding schemes that ensure progress will be made in the Weaver Valley regardless. "Funding is an issue but it's not a stumbling block," he says. But many believe the time has come for Weaver Valley to become the Northwest's next regional park. 

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