Urban History (2025), **52**, 762–778
doi:10.1017/S0963926824000646

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Building community through environmental regeneration: Operation Groundwork

Pierre Botcherby

Department of French Studies, School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK
Email: pierre.botcherby@warwick.ac.uk

Abstract

In the 1970s, the Major Urban Fringe Experiment, later known as Operation Groundwork, emerged in response to industrial decline, growing awareness of industry's environmental impact and grass-roots environmentalism and regeneration activism. Contrary to ideas of concomitant industrial and community decline, Groundwork demonstrates post-industrial regeneration's community-building potential. Groundwork created bespoke volunteer groups, helped set up others and worked with already existing organizations. Unlike contemporary regeneration initiatives in the 1970s and 1980s, these community links were retained even as Groundwork expanded. This article traces Groundwork's origins and its launch under Labour in the 1970s, its championing by Conservative Minister Michael Heseltine and its successful expansion from its initial test site in St Helens (Merseyside), to the North-West and then nationwide.

Introduction

On 8 May 1976, St Helens won the Rugby League Challenge Cup 20 points to 5 against Widnes at Wembley. Referencing the popular BBC sitcom, St Helens' veteran-filled side was nicknamed 'Dad's Army'. Their victory, closing a decade of sustained success, was the club's last major honour for 20 years. Handing the trophy to St Helens' captain was – ironically, given how much she became despised in Rugby League's Lancashire and Yorkshire heartlands – the Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher.[1]

This successful, but ageing, team reflected the industrial sector on which St Helens was built 'literally and metaphorically'.[2] A sizeable industrial town in Lancashire (Merseyside from 1974), St Helens was from the nineteenth century a centre for coal mining, glass manufacturing, pharmaceutics, brewing and more. Its economy and

[1]A. Service and A. Lawrenson, *On This Day: St Helens Rugby League Club 1873–2018* (London, 2018), 79–80; K. Coslett and M. Appleton, *A Welsh Saint: The Kel Coslett Story* (Skipton, 2010), 139.
[2]C. Forman, *Industrial Town: Self-Portrait of St Helens in the 1920s* (London, 1979), 12.

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

workforce were still largely industrial in the 1970s, despite early signs of decline. In coal mining, the town's existing mines shed more jobs between 1960 and 1980 than were created when the town's final new pit, Parkside, opened in 1964. The town's largest employer, glass manufacturers Pilkington Brothers, employed over 15,000 people in 1970 but had already foreseen reductions due to modernization and technological change and their St Helens workforce dropped below 10,000 by 1983. Greenall Whitley relocated their brewery to Warrington in 1975.[3]

This article demonstrates the building and maintaining of community in the face of de-industrialization and urban regeneration in towns like St Helens through a case-study of the central government-led environmental regeneration initiative Operation Groundwork. Both de-industrialization and regeneration are long-term processes which have markedly shaped post-war Britain. De-industrialization's socio-cultural, economic, emotional and physical impact on communities recurs across current scholarship. Building on scholars including Jim Tomlinson, Jon Lawrence and Mark Clapson, I argue de-industrialization prompted not a decline of community but an *evolution*, less rooted in industrial work but still present.[4] Urban planning and regeneration have likewise contributed to this evolution and maintenance of community in towns like St Helens since at least the 1960s. I endorse Alice Mah's description of communities once built on industrial work now built on attitudes towards regeneration and heed Sara Mass' call for greater focus on ordinary people – communities – in histories of planning and regeneration.[5]

Groundwork emerged in the late 1970s under Labour before the Conservative secretary of state for the environment, Michael Heseltine, galvanized it. The project remains understudied, even by scholars of planning, regeneration or the environment. John Sheail discusses contemporaneous environmental measures but not Groundwork. The seminal publication *Town and Country Planning in the UK* awards

[3]Lancashire Archives (LA), NC/ACC8443/ box 26 National Coal Board – North Western Division: No. 3 (St Helens) Area, 'Individual collieries', 1960; St Helens Local History and Archives (SHLHA), A36.2 NCB Western Area Colliery Profiles, 'Clock Face', Jan. 1981, 'Ravenhead Colliery', n.d., 'Bold Colliery', 1980, 'Cronton Colliery', 1981, 'Parkside', 1979, 'Sutton Manor Colliery', 1980; J. Phillips, 'The meaning of coal community in Britain since 1947', *Contemporary British History*, 32 (2018), 39–59; I. Hamilton-Fazey, *The Pathfinder: The Origins of the Enterprise Agency in Britain* (London, 1987), 6.

[4]J. Tomlinson, 'De-industrialization not decline: a new meta-narrative for post-war British history', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27 (2016), 76–99; J. Tomlinson, 'De-industrialization: strengths and weaknesses as a key concept for understanding post-war British history', *Urban History*, 47 (2020), 199–219; S. Gunn, 'European urbanities since 1945: a commentary', *Contemporary European History*, 24 (2015), 617–22; G. Ortolano, *Thatcher's Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism through an English New Town* (Cambridge, 2019); O. Saumarez Smith, *Boom Cities: Architect-Planners and the Politics of Radical Urban Renewal in 1960s Britain* (Oxford, 2019); S. High, L. MacKinnon and A. Perchard (eds.), *The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Postindustrial Places* (Vancouver, 2017), 155–256; C. Lawson, 'Making sense of the ruins: the historiography of deindustrialisation and its continued relevance in neoliberal times', *History Compass* (2020), https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12619; S.L. Linkon, *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization: Working-Class Writing about Economic Restructuring* (Ann Arbor, 2018); T. Hansell, *After Coal: Stories of Survival in Appalachia and Wales* (Morgantown, 2018); J. Lawrence, *Me Me Me? The Search for Community in Post-War England* (Oxford, 2019); M. Clapson, *Working-Class Suburb: Social Change on an English Council Estate* (Manchester, 2012).

[5]A. Mah, *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place: Landscapes and Legacies of Urban Decline* (Toronto, 2012), 73–8, 153–7; S. Mass, 'Commercial heritage as democratic action: historicising the "save the market" campaigns in Bradford and Chesterfield, 1969–1976', *Twentieth Century British History*, 29 (2018), 459–84.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

it a very complimentary couple of paragraphs. Heseltine devotes little attention to Groundwork in his autobiography, beyond a few lines praising its impact on the urban fringe, youth crime prevention, environmental education, the green economy and the private sector's environmental conscience.[6]

Bridging the 1970s and 1980s and two politically opposed governments, Groundwork validates Matthew Hilton *et al.*'s argument against analysing post-war Britain through distinct political periods and Andrew Seaton's contention that studying Britain through an environmental lens can unhitch our narrative from fixed turning points.[7] Tasked with involving local communities in improving industrially blighted land, Groundwork reflected growing political recognition of de-industrialization's environmental consequences. Its popularity with local communities fitted the trend of growing environmental activism and grass-roots interest for increased public participation in planning and urban regeneration in the 1960s and 1970s.[8] Groundwork is seen here as a political response to these expressions of 'popular individualism' which, put crudely, means 'having a say' in developments affecting one's life. As Emily Robinson *et al.* argue, this 'individualism' was compatible with community because it emerged in various guises, often emphasizing rather than opposing collective responsibility. The triumphant individualism associated with Thatcher is more complicated when studied through precise examples such as Groundwork, with community politics and grass-roots activism continuing across the political spectrum. Groundwork's community ties and reliance on volunteers reflected growing state collaboration with the voluntary sector in this period, a sector – like community in de-industrialized areas – too often dismissed as being in terminal decline.[9]

Both Labour and Conservatives emphasized Groundwork's community-rootedness. Concomitant economic regeneration initiatives championed by Heseltine, such as Business in the Community, were similarly framed as community-centred but instead became vehicles for the 1980s neo-liberal 'enterprise culture' rather than community regeneration. Urban planning under the Tories foregrounded an entrepreneurial, business-focused model relying on private sector contributions. Public–private partnerships underpinned Heseltine's flagship London Docklands and Merseyside Development Corporation initiatives, while corporate sponsorship

[6]J. Sheail, *An Environmental History of Twentieth-Century Britain* (Houndsmills, 2002); T. Hart, 'Planning for rural areas', in B. Cullingworth, V. Nadin, *et al.*, *Town and Country Planning in the UK* (15th edn, London, 2015), 401–3; M. Heseltine, *Life in the Jungle: My Autobiography* (London, 2000), 210–11.

[7]M. Hilton, C. Moores and F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, '*New Times* revisited: Britain in the 1980s', *Contemporary British History*, 31 (2017), 147, 150; A. Seaton, 'Environmental history and new directions in modern British historiography', *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (2019), 447–56.

[8]O. Saumarez Smith, 'Landscapes of hope and crisis: dereliction, environment, and leisure in Britain during the long 1970s', *Journal of British Studies*, 62 (2023), 988–1010; N. Carter, *Cycling and the British: A Modern History* (London, 2021), 186–93; M. Hilton, 'Politics is ordinary: non-governmental organisations and political participation in contemporary Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 22 (2011), 239, 244; S. Gunn, 'Ringroad: Birmingham and the collapse of the motor city ideal in 1970s Britain', *Historical Journal*, 61 (2018), 227–48; Mass, 'Commercial heritage'.

[9]E. Robinson, C. Schofield, F. Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and N. Thomlinson, 'Telling stories about post-war Britain: popular individualism and the "crisis" of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28 (2017), 268–304, quote at 278; Hilton, Moores and Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, '*New Times* revisited', 146–56; M. Hilton and J. McKay, 'The ages of voluntarism: an introduction', in M. Hilton and J. McKay (eds.), *The Ages of Voluntarism: How We Got to the Big Society* (Oxford, 2011), 1–26.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

supported his Garden Festivals.[10] Despite shared origins and structural similarities with economic regeneration (Business in the Community originated in the Community of St Helens Trust, developed by Pilkington's, which helped develop Groundwork) and planning policies, Groundwork retained close links to local communities, even upon expansion beyond St Helens to the North-West and nationwide. The backdrop of environmentalism, the desire for participation in planning and regeneration and Groundwork's endorsement by Heseltine and paternalist employers like Pilkington's were significant factors in this community-rootedness.

The article begins with Operation Groundwork's origins, set against the climate of emerging environmentalism, regeneration activism and greater political attention towards public participation from the 1960s. It highlights the centrality of community to Groundwork. It then discusses Groundwork's growth in St Helens across the 1980s and 1990s, focusing on the strong levels of public engagement, notably through its three volunteer groups and its role in developing other community environment groups. Finally, it discusses Groundwork's expansion across the North-West and nationwide, showing how it remained true to its community focus as it grew.

Groundwork's origins

Operation Groundwork built on a long, patchy, history of environmental management in Britain, as well as growing community activism around environmentalism, planning and urban regeneration. This section examines this backdrop and Groundwork's origins in the late 1970s as the Countryside Commission's 'Major Urban Fringe Experiment'.

As St Helens exemplifies, political attempts at managing industry's environmental impact had existed since the nineteenth century. Before industrialization, richer families had sent their children to St Helens for schooling and for its 'attractive, rural-sounding' addresses such as Peasley Vale and Cowley Vale. Nineteenth-century urban growth and industrialization changed this, with St Helens' 'notorious' air pollution affecting trees and crops and giving off a fetid smell for miles around. The town's degraded environment pushed the earl of Derby, whose Knowsley Hall estate bordered St Helens, to demand a 'committee of enquiry into noxious vapours', resulting in the 1863 Alkali Act, an early precursor to the 1956 Clean Air Act.[11]

Just as the 1956 act responded to the 1952 'Great Smog', high-profile environmental disasters in the 1960s like Aberfan (116 children and 28 adults died when a

[10]H. Benyon and R. Hudson, *The Shadow of the Mine: Coal and the End of Industrial Britain* (London, 2021), 161–82; A. Tallon, *Urban Regeneration in the UK* (2nd edn, London, 2012), 106–8; P. Healey, *Local Plans in British Land Use Planning* (Oxford, 1983), 76–80; D. Whitney and G. Haughton, 'Structures for development partnerships in the 1900s: practice in West Yorkshire', *The Planner*, 76 (1990), 15–19; T. Gore, 'Public/private partnerships schemes in UK urban regeneration: the role of joint enabling agencies', *Cities*, 8 (1991), 209–16; S. Wetherell, 'Sowing seeds: Garden Festivals and the remaking of British cities after deindustrialization', *Journal of British Studies*, 61 (2022), 83–104.

[11]This Act of Parliament escalated earlier attempts to tackle the town's pollution by taking the chemical firms responsible to court: T.C. Barker and J.R. Harris, *A Merseyside Town in the Industrial Revolution: St Helens, 1750–1900* (London, 1993), 178, 235–9, 349–51; B.W. Clapp, *An Environmental History of Britain since the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1994), 24–5, 34–7; W.G. Hoskins, *The Making of the English Landscape* (London, 1985), 222–3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

colliery spoil tip collapsed) and Torrey Canyon (100,000 tonnes of crude oil spilled off Cornwall, killing thousands of sea birds) prompted greater political focus and public engagement on industry's environmental impact. Otto Saumarez Smith notes this focus also had economic origins, with derelict land and outdated industrial infrastructure 'increasingly understood as a visual manifestation of the issues at the centre of Britain's economic travails'. Politicians blamed poor physical environment for population decrease in de-industrializing areas. Saumarez Smith posits 1966 as a key year, with the 1966 Local Government Act offering local authorities a 50 per cent grant for reclaiming and improving derelict land. Reclaiming industrial land did not normally mean replacing industry with more industry; the 1960s and 1970s saw 'totally new uses and roles' for derelict areas emerge in response to concerns around de-industrialization, leisure and ecology.[12]

These three themes, and industrial dereliction's negative image, featured in urban regeneration in St Helens from the 1960s. Local industrial employers like Pilkington's, United Glass and Greenall Whitley hoped the town's Central Area development plan would improve the town's image: 'the drab and inadequate appearance of the town matches ill with the nature of [our] industry and is of positive detriment to the impression given to both foreigners and visitors and in the development of the industry itself'.[13] The plan, alongside leisure provisions ('recreation and entertainment'), highlighted local successes in environmental and land management. In the 1970s, 24 acres of disused collieries in the north of the town were cleared and largely returned to their natural state, with picnic areas, an angling pond and some agricultural use. Locals voiced concerns over excess traffic so the final plans limited car-parking to protect the local environment, hinting at grass-roots appetite for involvement in environmental management and regeneration.[14]

Indeed, alongside high-profile politicians raising environmental concerns (Saumarez Smith cites Richard Crossman, Lord Robens and Duncan Sandys) and government agencies turning towards 'urban ecology' (the Nature Conservancy Council's 1978 report 'Nature conservation in urban areas'), grass-roots environmentalism and regeneration activism were growing in popularity. The English branches of Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace were founded in 1971 and 1977, respectively, and membership of environmental non-governmental organizations in Britain grew from under 1 million in 1971, to over 2 million by 1981 and over 4 million by 1991. Individual agency and community building underpinned Britain's early Green movement. Although that movement was seen as middle class, Groundwork shows environmental concerns permeated the working-class as well.[15] Related to environmentalism, and centred on local communities, were urban regeneration campaign groups. Sara Mass and Simon Gunn highlight notable campaigns in Birmingham, Bradford and Chesterfield from the early 1970s. These campaigns' seemingly narrow aims – protecting old market halls (Mass); preventing air and noise

[12]Saumarez Smith, 'Landscapes of hope', 988–92, quote at 989; Carter, *Cycling*, 188.

[13]The National Archives (TNA), HLG79/1201, note about St Helens to Mr Cox, 28 May 1967.

[14]SHLHA, ST/10/30/14, County Borough of St Helens, 'Amendment of development plan', 1965; TNA, HLG79/1201, note 'St Helens'; SHLHA, MTH/9, P. Smith, 'The social, economic, and spatial change which has occurred in the village of Rainford, near St Helens, from the 19th century to the present day', University of Lancaster BA dissertation, 1985, 8–9, 19–22, 24–6, 31.

[15]Saumarez Smith, 'Landscapes of hope'; Hilton, 'Politics is ordinary', 239, 244; M. Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb, and the Greening of Britain: Romantic Protest, 1945–1980* (New York, 1994), 1–8, 208–10.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

pollution (Gunn) – had broad community ramifications like preserving the local character, economy, sense of place and appeal to visitors, or preventing artificial neighbourhood divisions and the exacerbation of socio-economic differences and inequalities.[16]

This growing local political engagement with 'ordinary' or 'everyday' issues reflected the popular individualistic desire to have more of a say than previously about urban regeneration. Along with reclaiming derelict land, public participation was prominent in political thinking about urban planning in the 1960s when a 'social approach' (including a focus on 'popular action') replaced the professional 'physical approach' that had dominated since World War II.[17] Favourable opinions towards greater public participation in planning spanned the Labour and Conservative parties, culminating in the 1968 Committee on Public Participation in Planning and the 1969 'Skeffington Report'. The emergence of grass-roots urban regeneration campaigns shows politicians were right to increase public participation but that provisions for this participation were insufficient.

Operation Groundwork emerged against this backdrop of growing political interest in and grass-roots engagement with the environment, planning and regeneration. It predated Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, originating under James Callaghan's Labour administration as the Countryside Commission's late 1970s 'Major Urban Fringe Experiment'. In line with Robinson *et al.*'s popular individualism, Hilton *et al.*'s rejection of distinct political periods, and Seaton's questioning of turning points, Groundwork exemplifies how developments associated with the 1980s and Thatcherism have their causes or origins in the preceding decade. Some elements ('seeds') Sam Wetherell discusses as novel to Garden Festivals – private sector sponsorship, encouraging local individuals and organizations to participate, 'greening' derelict spaces for leisure and recreation – first emerged in Major Urban Fringe/Groundwork.[18]

In the 1970s, the Countryside Commission became increasingly aware of 'ineffective' urban–rural fringe use due to competing land uses and the missed opportunities for leisure, recreation and reclamation. Taking inspiration from earlier Upland Management Experiments concerned with the impact of recreation on National Parks, the Commission appointed project officers to particular areas to work with interested parties such as landowners, local authorities and conservation volunteers. The Commission established several such urban fringe schemes for small-scale improvements and to resolve conflicts between land users over access. However, for larger issues like industrial blight, waste or spoil – a 'considerable concern' in towns like St Helens – the Commission needed a more ambitious approach. Major Urban Fringe expanded these small-scale initiatives, with teams of project officers working with local authorities and representatives of landowners and users, backed by substantial government funding.[19]

[16]Mass, 'Commercial heritage', 460–2, 466–70; Gunn, 'Ringroad', 231–2, 234, 238.

[17]Robinson *et al.*, 'Telling stories', 302; Hilton, 'Politics is ordinary', 233–5; G. Ortolano, *Thatcher's Progress*, 146.

[18]Wetherell, 'Sowing seeds'.

[19]SHLHA, A15(P), J. Handley, 'The Operation Groundwork experience', in 'Breaking new ground: the report of the Operation Groundwork Conference, July 20th–22nd 1988', 3; TNA, COU3/601, M. Heseltine, 'Message from the president of the Board of Trade', in 'Groundwork: the first decade' (Countryside

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Countryside management in this era centred on providing 'a local service which can resolve conflicts of interest between those who live in and manage the countryside and those who visit the countryside for their recreation' and 'clearing eyesores and dereliction'. The services were undertaken within an area's Local or Structural Plan and linked environmental regeneration to wider urban renewal. There was an emphasis on involving local communities through parish councils, schools and colleges, youth groups, prisoners and community service, voluntary wardens, conservation corps, amenity and recreation groups, or government schemes such as the Youth Opportunities Programme and the Special Temporary Employment Scheme. Formal community engagement in countryside management can be traced to the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (1959) and the Farming and Wildlife Advisory Groups (1969). Advisory Panels for conservation and community involvement in small-scale regeneration such as cleaning local eyesores had been advocated in the 1967 Civic Amenities Act and the Skeffington Report. The latter had proposed voluntary groups undertake small-scale aesthetic improvements to urban areas such as tree planting and that senior-year school pupils conduct surveys about proposed plans.[20]

These themes – local-rootedness, community involvement, dereliction, recreation – were central to Major Urban Fringe. The twin focus of dereliction and recreation influenced the designation of St Helens and neighbouring Knowsley as its testing ground. St Helens' 'despoiled land created by mineral working, waste disposal and neglect' would test the capacity to implement large-scale physical reclamation. St Helens alone encompassed 60 per cent of Merseyside's statutory derelict land (311 hectares, plus 477 potentially derelict hectares used for active mineral extraction or tipping operations). Knowsley's combination of Grade 1 and 2 agricultural land and 'heritage landscapes' which had been 'eroded' by post-war high-density council housing would test the capacity to resolve land use conflicts. In June 1979, St Helens' local press revelled in being chosen for the Countryside Commission's 'largest ever' management scheme. The council leader said the scheme needed the council, individual organizations and the community to contribute and collaborate. A shadow nevertheless hung over the programme's inauguration, with fears that the new Conservative government's public spending cuts might immediately limit Major Urban Fringe's scale.[21]

The Conservative politician under whose auspices Major Urban Fringe fell was the secretary of state for the environment, Michael Heseltine, whose interest in regenerating derelict land was long-standing. Shocked by London's derelict docks in the

Commission, 1993), 4; Saumarez Smith, 'Landscapes of hope', 989–90; B. Green, *Countryside Conservation* (3rd edn, London, 1996), 190–1.

[20]SHLHA, STSD/19/1, Countryside Commission, 'Local authority countryside management policies' (1978); 'Grants to local authorities for countryside management projects' (CCP112, Jul. 1978); Green, *Countryside Conservation*, 189–90; TNA, CAB152/130, P. Robshaw, 'Public participation in urban planning: report of an Anglo-American Conference held at Ditchley Park by The Ditchley Foundation in association with The Civic Trust, 13–16 June 1969' (Enstone, 1969), 22–3; 'People and planning: report of the Committee on Public Participation in Planning' (Apr. 1969), 28, 35, 58–9.

[21]SHLHA, STSD/19/3, Major Urban Fringe Experiment, 'Visit of secretary of state for the environment to St Helens, 17 June 1980'; STSD/19/1, note about derelict and vacant land in St Helens, *c.* 1978; Countryside Commission Press Release, 'St Helens chosen for Major Urban Fringe Experiment' (27 Jun. 1979); 'Eyes of the world on unique scheme', *St Helens Reporter*, 26 Jun. 1979, 1.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

early 1970s (while a junior minister in the Department for the Environment), he felt similarly about early 1980s Liverpool. As a result, environmental regeneration became a focus of the Merseyside Development Corporation, as well as the London Docklands project and the Garden Festivals. As Heseltine later wrote, a 'concentration on housing to the exclusion of work, recreation and environment is a mistake of the past'. Though believing in government and taxpayer contributions to alleviate 'urban decline' and 'social stress', he preferred combining public and private resources, 'bringing local authority, private and voluntary interests into partnership for joint renewal schemes'.[22] Nonetheless, as had been speculated, the change in government did bring changes to Major Urban Fringe.

In January 1980, Merseyside County Council hinted that Major Urban Fringe would be scaled back. Only 'ordinary' government funds were available, not the promised 'special funding'. In June, Heseltine confirmed his support but stipulated changes, including reducing manpower to one project officer per area (as in the previous smaller-scale countryside management schemes), shortening Major Urban Fringe's timescale and increasing private sector involvement by setting up a Trust (cheaper than public spending and better at involving 'industry and community' groups). The local authorities in St Helens, Knowsley and Merseyside agreed, as did the Countryside Commission. The Community of St Helens Trust (Pilkington's agency for protecting St Helens' local economy against industrial job losses and which inspired Heseltine's economic regeneration initiative, Business in the Community) agreed to help form the Trust.[23] The support of a major local employer, particularly of the paternalist persuasion such as Pilkington's, was important to Groundwork's success in St Helens. The importance of local private sector and grass-roots involvement was embodied in the name change from Major Urban Fringe to Groundwork, a 'snappy title' with connotations of community and themes like 'ground level', 'groundswell', 'break new ground', 'getting it off the ground', etc.[24] Although part of the Conservative government, Heseltine recognized, as had Labour, the importance of community involvement. The similarity in policies reflected the growing interest in environmentalism and regeneration evident across political divides during the 1960s and 1970s.

Local community involvement was emphasized throughout Groundwork's development. Archive materials systematically mention the importance of involving the local community, local interest groups and volunteers alongside the private sector: the 'knowledge and skills of local people and industries' were key. These echoed the thinking on public participation explored above, aiming to combine 'the skills and resources of local people with the local councils, industry, voluntary organizations and the Countryside Commission'.[25] Early promotional material billed Groundwork

[22]M. Heseltine, *Where There's A Will* (London, 1987), 156–7, 169–70, 172–3.

[23]SHLHA, STSD/19/2, letter from Merseyside County Council county planning officer to St Helens councillor M.J. Doyle, 3 Jan. 1980; meeting on the Countryside Commission Urban Fringe Experiment, 13 Mar. 1980; letter from Heseltine, 20 Jul. 1980; Countryside Commission Press Release, 'Minister backs Urban Fringe Experiment – but wants changes', 21 Aug. 1980; 'Urban Fringe Project St Helens/Knowsley, meeting at St Helens', 8 Oct. 1980; notes of a meeting with the Countryside Commission, 18 Aug. 1980; J.M. Davidson, 'Urban Fringe Project St Helens, Draft Commission Paper', Sep. 1980.

[24]SHLHA, STSD/19/2, notes of meetings on Major Urban Fringe, 21 Nov. 1980 and 4 Dec. 1980.

[25]SHLHA, STSD/19/2, draft publicity statement by David Wilcox Associates, 7 Jan. 1981; further examples in STSD/19/1–4, see P. Botcherby, 'Community, de-industrialisation, and post-industrial regeneration in a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

as an enterprise trust, akin to Heseltine's economic regeneration initiatives. However, in 1981 the word 'enterprise' was dropped, underlining Groundwork's focus on local communities over business. Heseltine hoped this locally rooted model could roll out more widely as an umbrella organization for urban fringe regeneration.[26] As with enterprise trusts for economic regeneration, Groundwork was to be the locally rooted body acting in the interests of and with the co-operation of its local community. In theory, Groundwork combined public and private sector resources with an emphasis on the local and the promotion of community through resident and volunteer involvement. Groundwork's evolution, in St Helens and beyond, will show how this community materialized in practice.

A framework for community

When examining Groundwork's success in community building, its quarterly newsletters and annual reports offer good insight. Both charted Groundwork's activities and achievements but their target audience differed. The newsletters were shorter and simpler, often black-and-white, and highlighted recent Groundwork activities and sense of community. They advertised forthcoming events and encouraged further involvement. The newsletters resemble the in-house newspapers and magazines common to paternalist employers which contributed to building communities of 'industrial citizens', partly by recognizing activities and employees that upheld the management's desired image for the company and encouraging others to do the same.[27] The annual reports recorded Groundwork's activities in a more marketable fashion. The target audience was 'shareholders' or 'investors', i.e. public and private bodies with an existing or potential future interest in Groundwork. They were more professional publications, partly in colour on glossy paper, and included official statistics and financial statements. The volunteers' contributions were evoked in less detail than in the newsletters. There was a similar use of pictures to the newsletters, showing groups of smiling volunteers or action shots of volunteers at work to illustrate Groundwork's positive impact and community spirit.

The evidence suggests Groundwork created a framework for community. Several volunteer groups quickly emerged: Groundwork Conservation Volunteers (GCV), Friends of Operation Groundwork (FROGS) and Froghoppers (for children). GCV's inclusivity was showcased in the inaugural 1983 newsletter: 'everyone is welcome as the tasks require no experience'. Membership was diverse, including factory workers, white-collar professionals, pensioners, students and the unemployed.[28] The GCV spring 1983 Volunteer Programme included tree planting and hedging, woodland management, waterway clearance, landscape improvements and dune management; this latter task was not in St Helens but on the Sefton coast near Liverpool and conducted in partnership with other volunteer wildlife groups and university

Merseyside town: St Helens, 1968–2018', University of Warwick Ph.D. thesis, 2022, 249; STSD/19/3, 'Operation Groundwork: making good between town and country'.

[26]SHLHA, STSD/19/3, 'Urban Fringe Experiment: memorandum and articles of trust', *c.* 1981; 'Operation Groundwork: making good between town and country'; STSD/19/2, letter from Heseltine.

[27]T. Strangleman, *Voices of Guinness: An Oral History of the Park Royal Brewery* (New York, 2019), 38–40, 45, 54.

[28]SHLHA, A15(P), 'Your countryside needs you', *c.* 1981; 'Operation Groundwork', issue 1, Spring 1983; TNA, COU3/601, 'Groundwork: the first decade', 21.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

students. The summer 1983 programme mentions 'maintenance tours' of ongoing projects and the 'FROG Festival', showcasing volunteers' work to the wider public. Froghoppers allowed children to learn about the environment, engage in basic conservation work like tree planting, and undertake outdoor activities like orienteering. Belonging to these groups created a sense of allegiance and identity among volunteers. Several newsletter photographs show children in their Froghoppers or Groundwork t-shirts.[29]

Statistics in newsletters and annual reports indicate Groundwork's activities were popular. In 1983, over 50 people attended courses on land and landscape. These were educational (taught by geologists, archaeologists and botanists) and an opportunity for local input. Attendees were diverse, including teachers, miners, farmers and ramblers; the varied perspectives created an 'extremely useful picture of perceptions of and attitudes to the environment'. Around 30 volunteers helped Whiston Village Angling Club with pond improvements, an example of Groundwork as an umbrella organization working with existing local groups. Over 30 FROGS and GCVs toured 17 Groundwork sites to sample the range of projects (including 'major land reclamation and landscaping', school nature gardens, small 'environmental improvement' schemes and tree planting) and over 50 volunteers (children and adults) helped clear a silted-up section of the St Helens Canal.[30]

This popularity continued over time. The figures for 1984–85 (for Merseyside, not just St Helens) reveal the GCVs contributed to around 50 per cent of all projects, completing 58 tasks since 1982, with 636 adults giving up 1,092 volunteer days. By 1993, it was estimated the GCVs had completed over 800 tasks. In 1995, over 120 tasks were ongoing, involving over 260 organizations. There were 180 volunteer organizations which had given up over 7,000 volunteer days between them and, in St Helens alone, there were 17 community sites and 73 schools projects with 2,000 adults and over 9,000 schoolchildren involved. As discussed above, existing local groups and schools had been identified in government policy documents as parts of the community which could galvanize voluntary action. This successful public engagement suggests neither the voluntary sector nor the wider community in St Helens were in decline.[31]

These numbers indicate an increase in Groundwork's activities across the 1980s and 1990s but are not the full story of Groundwork's community-building. The impact of participation in voluntary initiatives must be understood qualitatively not just quantitatively.[32] The volunteer work was meant to be enjoyable as well as necessary, combining purpose and fun to keep people involved. These attributes evidence the connection made between de-industrialization, ecology and leisure. Regarding the canal clearance, the newsletter remarked that 'spurred on by numerous cups of tea and lemonade a great deal of digging was done by all', and that once finished the volunteers were rewarded with a 'well earned Barbecue and bonfire'.

[29]SHLHA, A15(P), 'The Groundwork Conservation Volunteers: programme April–June 1983'; TNA, AT107/13, Operation Groundwork, 'The Groundwork Conservation Volunteers: programme July–September 1983'; 'Operation Groundwork news', Summer 1991, Autumn 1991.

[30]SHLHA, A15(P), 'Operation Groundwork', 1:1983, 2:1983, 3:1984.

[31]SHLHA, A15(P), 'The Groundwork Trust: St Helens and Knowsley, Merseyside: annual report 1984/85'; 'Operation Groundwork news', Spring 1993; 'Groundwork St Helens, Knowsley & Sefton', 1995; Hilton and McKay, 'The ages of voluntarism'; Tomlinson, 'De-industrialization not decline'.

[32]Hilton and McKay, 'The ages of voluntarism', 12.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Environmental reclamation was married with socializing and community-building.[33] In 1995, one regular volunteer commented that 'Groundwork Day is the highlight of the week for both of us…the best moments are at mid-day when the job is half completed and we sit back and relax with chips and mugs of tea in the outdoors!'[34] Events were not always tied to reclamation activities: Christmas parties and tenth anniversary celebrations for staff and volunteers provided further socializing opportunities, while annual Town and Country Fairs reached a wider public and, potentially, widened Groundwork's community; St Helens' 1991 fair attracted over 5,000 visitors and Knowsley's over 2,500.[35] Groundwork ran the Lord Winstanley Scholarship, providing travel and training money for young people on low incomes working as environmental volunteers, as well as the Young Leaders scheme to give participants 'a chance to take a leading role in improving their surroundings'.[36]

There are shades of paternalism in these developments, unsurprising given the influence of Heseltine, a self-avowed fan of paternalistic businesses who advocated public–private collaboration in regeneration. Pilkington's and Greenall Whitley's financial support was essential to Groundwork's success. A Pilkington's factory worker was seconded to Groundwork to set up the GCVs while Pilkington's was described as 'one of the Trust's most enthusiastic supporters'.[37] As mentioned, companies like Pilkington's stood to gain from supporting local regeneration initiatives. They recognized the need to act in the town's and community's interests, particularly once the large-scale industrial employment of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries became unsustainable. The Community of St Helens Trust, notably, was their attempt to reduce de-industrialization's impact on the town's economy. To quote one senior manager, Peter Sheperdson, 'responsibility does not end at the factory gate, especially in a place like St Helens. We can't have a situation where my secretary's brother is out of work with no one helping him; that's going to affect her. We live within the community and the community has got to be comfortable otherwise we are in trouble.'[38] Their involvement in and support for Groundwork matches this commitment to and interest in the town's and community's future. The GCVs, FROGS and Froghoppers have parallels with paternalist employers' sports clubs and societies, the parties and barbecues with workplace social clubs and summer fêtes. The regeneration tasks themselves created engaged, active citizens and communities, akin to the 'industrial citizens' of workplace communities at companies like Pilkington's.[39] The quote below captures the can-do spirit of togetherness which Groundwork doubtless considered the embodiment of the ethos it encouraged amongst volunteers:

[33]SHLHA, A15(P), 'Operation Groundwork', 3:1984.

[34]SHLHA, A15(P), 'Groundwork St Helens', 1995.

[35]*Ibid.*; 'Operation Groundwork news: 10th birthday special issue', Dec. 1991; 'The Groundwork Trust St Helens–Knowsley–Sefton annual report 1990–1991'; 'The Groundwork Trust St Helens–Knowsley–Sefton annual report 1991–1992'.

[36]SHLHA, A15(P), 'Operation Groundwork news: 10th birthday special issue'; 'Operation Groundwork news', Autumn 1991.

[37]Heseltine, *Where There's A Will*, 164; SHLHA, A15(P), Handley, 'Operation Groundwork', 9; 'Annual report 1984/85'; TNA, COU3/601, 'Groundwork: the first decade', 8.

[38]Cited in Hamilton-Fazey, *Pathfinder*, 5.

[39]Strangleman, *Guinness*, 40, 50.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> the next most likeable trip was Sutton Manor where we tried to improve a small area. We planted plants and shrubs and we also built small seating places. But when we went back to the same place the following week the area had been vandalised. But everyone started again to improve the area and to show the vandals we were not defeated. I enjoyed that a lot. If felt as if you were helping to improve your town.[40]

Judging Groundwork's impact beyond its own volunteers is, nonetheless, difficult. According to Groundwork's Rochdale and Oldham branch, by 1988 50 per cent of residents knew of Groundwork and 15 per cent had participated; no equivalent statistic exists for St Helens.[41] The emergence across St Helens of groups concerned with their local environment, though, is suggestive of Groundwork's influence and reflects growing grass-roots engagement with environmentalism.

One group, the Sutton Mill Dam Action Group, began in protest at the dam's filling with industrial waste. Formed in 1976, it showed how Groundwork built on an existing grass-roots environmentalism and community activism. Petitions were signed, meetings held, the local council acquired the dam and a Derelict Land Grant brought the site back into public use. In 1984, the group raised £400 for Groundwork to create educational nature packs about the dam for local schoolchildren, and members of the group helped set up FROGS. The dam was transformed into a wildlife park and angling site, an example of a local community successfully defending local interests and making something positive out of their local environment.[42] The Sankey Canal Restoration Society was formed in 1985 with Groundwork's encouragement. The society's 'principal aim' was the canal's 'full restoration'. Still active today, they facilitate restoration through 'monthly work parties', alongside talks, guided walks and visits to other restoration projects. The work parties are presented similarly to Groundwork's volunteer projects: 'all volunteers are assured of a warm friendly welcome' and one of the 10 'rules' is to 'enjoy it'. They co-operate with local authorities and other waterway regeneration groups, like the Waterways Recovery Group and the Inland Waterways Association.[43] The Sankey Canal Society's environmental work dovetails with industrial heritage, another form of post-industrial community building. They have prioritized not just the environmental benefits of restoring the canal, but its historical importance as Britain's first canal and its centrality to St Helens' industrial development. While studies have underlined the risks of industrial heritage being disconnected from surrounding working-class communities, an approach which actively involves volunteers (whether from the local area, with an interest in the canal, or both) is less susceptible to this.[44]

The Newton Lake Action Group, meanwhile, was established in 1991 to campaign for the site's restoration and, with support and advice from Groundwork, held volunteer-led clean-up events.[45] Groundwork influenced the creation of a new

[40]SHLHA, A15(P), 'Annual report 1984/85'.

[41]SHLHA, A15(P), C. Chataway, 'The way forward', in: 'Breaking new ground', 31.

[42]S. Wainwright, 'The Sutton Mill Dam in Sutton, St Helens' and 'Sutton Mill Dam and community action', www.suttonbeauty.org.uk/suttonhistory/, accessed 24 Mar. 2020; SHLHA, A15(P), 'Operation Groundwork', 1:1983, 3:1984.

[43]'About SCARS' and 'Work Parties', https://www.sankeycanal.co.uk/, accessed 24 Mar. 2020.

[44]Barker and Harris, *A Merseyside Town*, 11–23; Lawson, 'Making sense of the ruins'.

[45]SHLHA, A15(P), 'Annual report 1991–1992'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

St Helens Ramblers Group, following interest shown in the Ramblers Association at a Town and Country Fair and a 'well-attended' meeting at Groundwork's offices.[46] In addition to encouraging grass-roots groups, Groundwork collaborated with the local council to create the Wildlife Advisory Group in 1982, an important step towards the 1986 'Policy for nature'. In a 2006 update, the policy aimed 'to work with the community to encourage wildlife in St Helens for its own sake, for the people of St Helens and for the attractiveness of the Borough' and mentioned the importance of groups like Groundwork or the Sankey Canal Society in achieving this.[47]

These examples show Groundwork successfully building on and generating interest in environmental regeneration and fostering greater community involvement and togetherness. 'Community' was repeated across their schemes and initiatives, and annual reports routinely praised residents and volunteers. In 1991, a volunteer co-ordinator and a community link officer were appointed in light of the success of the GCVs and FROGS, and newsletters mention a Community Maintenance Team. A Groundwork Trust Community Fund, to which the public could donate, was established.[48]

Breaking ground beyond St Helens

The government quickly decided upon Groundwork's expansion across the North-West, implicitly acknowledging its success in St Helens. A Groundwork North-West Unit oversaw bids from local authorities and established new Groundwork Trusts. Of 15 bids, 5 were chosen – Macclesfield, Oldham and Rochdale, Rossendale, Salford and Trafford, and Wigan – and were established in 1983–84. The North-West was chosen for its de-industrialization and dereliction, and the practicalities of sharing experiences between neighbouring local authorities. The five bids offered a range of testing grounds: Macclesfield was a rural borough bordering the Peak District National Park, an 'important area for recreation and leisure' for Greater Manchester (recalling the Upland Management Experiments of the 1960s), whereas Wigan, like St Helens, had 'major problems of dereliction and industrial decline'.[49] A nationwide expansion was evoked, too: 'today is not just the launch of Groundwork North West: rather it is day one for a wider Groundwork movement'. Over 40 local authorities expressed interest and the Groundwork Foundation was set up in 1984 to oversee future expansion. The first Trusts outside the North-West were Hertfordshire, East Durham, South Leeds and Merthyr Tydfil. By 1991, over 30 Trusts had been established.[50]

[46]SHLHA, A15(P), 'Operation Groundwork news', Winter 1991.

[47]St Helens Council, 'Policy for nature: a biodiversity action plan for St Helens' (Mar. 2006), http://old.sthelens.gov.uk/media/157592/policy_for_nature_-_a_biodiversity_action_plan_for_st_helens.pdf, accessed 24 Mar. 2020; SHLHA, A15(P), M. Bradshaw, 'The wild side of town', in 'Breaking new ground', 21.

[48]SHLHA, A15(P), 'Annual report 1991–1992'; 'The Groundwork Trust St Helens–Knowsley–Sefton annual report 1992–1993'; 'Operation Groundwork news', Spring 1991, Winter 1991.

[49]TNA, COU3/601, 'Groundwork: the first decade', 9; AT107/37, 'Groundwork Foundation' presentation slides, *c.* 1984. Another document (1983) suggests 21 bids; HLG156/1399, letter about 'Groundwork North West', 26 Jan. 1984; Regional Controllers (Planning) Group, 'Paper for discussion at meeting on 21 September 1983: extension of Groundwork North West'.

[50]TNA, AT107/13, Press Release, '"Keep it local" says Patrick Jenkin', Department of the Environment, 11 Mar. 1983; COU3/601, 'Groundwork: the first decade', 4, 11.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The expansion did not change Groundwork's core principles and aims. As in St Helens, the new Trusts looked to local companies, residents and volunteer groups to manage and undertake projects. A pamphlet described 'involv[ing] local communities in the task of environmental improvement'.[51] Writing in 1991, Heseltine said that 'the emphasis on local is important. These are not programmes imposed from above but are determined locally and achieved by local people of all ages.' John Handley, director of the original St Helens–Knowsley Trust, agreed that Groundwork could only function as a 'local-level' partnership rather than as a quasi-government development agency.[52]

This community, local-level focus was reflected in Groundwork's projects. In 1983, 'local conservation advisory groups' were advocated, similar to St Helens' Wildlife Advisory Group.[53] In 1984, Oldham and Rochdale undertook a similar canal clearance to that at St Helens, involving volunteers, the Rochdale Canal Society and labourers from government schemes like the Manpower Services Commission's Community Programme and the Youth Training Scheme.[54] Publicity pamphlets issued by the new North-West Trusts repeated the people-centred, community focus on one side ('there is a part for everyone to play in Groundwork – companies, organisations and individuals') and gave details of ongoing projects on the other. Oldham and Rochdale outlined large-scale schemes the Trust aimed to tackle and detailed where the community could get involved: restoring the Rochdale Canal, improving council-owned woodlands, planting schemes on larger-scale projects and improving access to the surrounding moorland. Rossendale as well as Salford and Trafford outlined proposed schemes and attached a call for local participation: 'you or your organisation could help…by providing physical assistance or financial contributions, and by simply telling the Trust about the problems you think Groundwork should be tackling'. Wigan did not highlight specific schemes but invited suggestions from the community: 'Groundwork will make cash available to local groups and industry so that you can do your bit…a chance to see how much can be done if everybody works together.'[55]

A review of Groundwork's first decade highlights various successful projects. The Middleton Riverside Park (Oldham and Rochdale) saw a local industrial company offer land it was not using, on the condition that labour, funding and subsequent management arrangements could be organized. A Countryside Commission grant was matched by the company, Groundwork planned the regeneration and Rochdale Council took on the management of the newly created park, which transformed a 'derelict…eye-sore' into a 'gateway' between the town centre and pre-existing public woodlands. As part of this successful co-operation between local partners, schoolchildren helped with planting. The 'Five Villages Project' (South Leeds) began in 1989 to 'ensure continued community involvement in all aspects of project work, from instigation through to implementation', undertaking over 118 projects by 1992. The Seaham Community Link (East Durham) was running more than 30 projects after three years and relied on around 20 volunteers. By 1991, it was estimated that the

[51]TNA, FT18/96, 'Introducing Groundwork: partnership for action', *c.* 1984.
[52]TNA, COU3/601, 'Groundwork: the first decade', 4, 21.
[53]TNA, HLG156/1399, minutes of a liaison meeting, 23 Nov. 1983.
[54]TNA, AT107/13, 'Groundwork North West Newsletter', Issue 2, Spring 1984.
[55]TNA, AT107/13, 'Caring for the countryside on your doorstep', *c.* 1984.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Trusts had completed over 9,000 environmental projects, involving around 130,000 volunteers and 260,000 schoolchildren.[56]

Despite these positive examples and the swift development of Groundwork, expanding it was not without difficulties. Some Trusts more actively involved the community than others, potentially diluting the overall community focus – though flexibility was necessary to allow for local particularities. One document wondered about the 'relative importance' of public participation – which 'could be entirely ephemeral' – and suggested the 'only long term result' was the 'content of the projects actually carried out', dismissing any potential wider community benefit.[57] Some local authorities wanted to spend Groundwork's money on pre-planned schemes which lacked funding, hampering the private and voluntary sector sides. In November 1983, it was noted that the new North-West Trusts were behind schedule and that 'local authorities were not over-enthusiastic'. The Association of Metropolitan Authorities warned that Groundwork, while an 'interesting and useful approach', should not detract from 'the role local authorities can and do play' in dealing with environmental dereliction. It was suggested that early successes on Merseyside were influenced by 'relatively generous allocations' available because of the Department of the Environment's 'priority' focus on it.[58]

A further hurdle to Groundwork's wider viability was securing private sector funding. Some national companies were unwilling to donate to geographically limited projects. Others only wanted to contribute to projects in areas where they had employees. In the uncertain economy of the 1980s, many did not have spare capital for donations. Local branches of national companies did not necessarily have authority to distribute funds to local schemes.[59] Groundwork's political supporters nonetheless remained upbeat. They believed businesses would contribute once mutual benefits like the impact of an 'attractive' environment became clear and stressed that private sector input could include secondments (as with Pilkington's in St Helens) or equipment. One solution for improving private sector contributions was 'thematic' projects joint-sponsored by large companies such as Shell's 'Brightsite' scheme to encourage owners of commercial and industrial premises to undertake landscape improvements.[60]

Conclusion

Groundwork successfully engaged local communities and enabled participation in regeneration. Through its own groups (GCVs, FROGS, Froghoppers) and linking existing community groups via joint participation on projects, Groundwork provided

[56]TNA, COU3/601, 'Groundwork: the first decade', 4, 22.

[57]TNA, HLG156/1399, 'Paper for discussion at meeting on 21 September 1983'.

[58]TNA, AT107/13, Operation Groundwork/Groundwork North West/Groundwork Extension, note of meeting, 28 Nov. 1983; HLG156/1399, letter from Association of Metropolitan Authorities to Department of the Environment North West Regional Office, 3 Jan. 1984; 'Paper for discussion at meeting on 21 September 1983'.

[59]TNA, COU3/601, 'Groundwork: the first decade', 12, 18; AT107/13, Groundwork Extension: note of meeting held on 2 Mar. 1984; Heseltine, *Where There's A Will*, 155.

[60]TNA, AT107/13, Groundwork North West Press Release, 'A new approach to environmental problems – Groundwork North West launched by secretary of state', *c.* Jul. 1983; COU3/601, 'Groundwork: the first decade', 10, 15, 24.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a framework for community-building through environmental regeneration. Against economically and socially disruptive de-industrialization, Groundwork both helped maintain the associational life familiar to industrial towns and enabled people – communities – to (re)form through shared efforts to shape their local areas and communities. It is a corrective to historical and popular conceptions that conflate industrial decline with community decline and displays a clear desire among local communities to participate actively – to have a say – in their own future. Building on Hilton *et al.* and Hilton and McKay's work, it undermines assertions of the predominance of individualism in the 1980s and the decline of voluntarism in Britain.

Groundwork's success in partnering local authorities, the private sector and the public rubbed off on other 1980s regeneration initiatives like City Challenge, Development Corporations and Garden Festivals. Groundwork continued to promote the grass-roots campaigns and groups it supported and developed in local communities. Into the 1990s, it endorsed private sector-sponsored community and environmental initiatives like Shell's Brightsite and Green Generation, Esso's Green-link, News International's Greenforce Challenge and Barclay's Innervision scheme and Community Forest Awards. Groundwork newsletters praised their successes and encouraged people and groups to participate. Critics will argue – with some foundation given these companies' roots in polluting, profiteering sectors like banking, the media and oil – that such schemes were 'greenwashing', attempts to portray their companies as more environmentally friendly than they really are.[61] These schemes nonetheless styled themselves on Groundwork, helping local communities and groups to preserve and protect the environment, which underlines the success of Groundwork's model. The green-friendly publicity for the companies aside, the schemes did have positive local impacts. Greenforce promised £15,000 plus assistance from Groundwork to locally rooted environmental projects. Beneficiaries in St Helens included Parr Miners' Residents Association (linking industry and the environment) and the Newton Lake Action Group, which had already benefited from Groundwork's support. In 1993, Innervision saw Barclay's bank staff join GCV, Froghoppers and Knowsley Rangers to clear bracken and improve footpaths at Pex Hill to improve disabled access. Between 1989 and 1994, Innervision spent over £500,000 on 228 projects nationwide and was supported by the Department of the Environment. The Community Forest Awards were partnered by The Woodland Trust to recognize 'community-based contributions' towards Community Forests.[62]

Inevitably with studies of community, questions can be asked over the extent of engagement with Groundwork and how representative such engagement was of the community overall. However, there is strong evidence of not only Groundwork's creation of a community framework but also of a strong, widespread and growing community engagement with this framework. Crucially, Groundwork did not lose its community focus as it expanded beyond St Helens to the North-West and nationwide. Still active today after over 40 years, Groundwork has a much broader remit than the original St Helens experiment and yet remains rooted in the local and the community.

[61]K. Becker-Oulsen and S. Potueck, 'Greenwashing', in S.O. Idowu, N. Capaldi, L. Zu and A. Das Gupta (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Corporate Social Responsibility* (Berlin, 2013), 1318–23.

[62]SHLHA, A15(P), 'Operation Groundwork news', Autumn 1992, Spring 1993, Autumn 1993, Autumn 1994.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Acknowledgments. This case-study originates in my Ph.D. thesis: 'Community, de-industrialisation, and post-industrial regeneration in a Merseyside town: St Helens, 1968–2018', University of Warwick, 2022. I wish to thank Mathilde Alain, Otto Saumarez Smith, Mathew Thomson and Rosemary Wakeman for their feedback, proofreading and support with this article.

Cite this article: Botcherby, P. (2025). Building community through environmental regeneration: Operation Groundwork. *Urban History*, **52,** 762–778, doi:10.1017/S0963926824000646

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000646 Published online by Cambridge University Press