



spring  
gardens  
bounce  
back

**Where?**

Bishop Auckland, County Durham.

**What?**

New wetland habitats and a flood defence scheme have transformed this area into a safer and more beautiful place that people visit in droves.

**Benefits**

Spring Gardens is now much more popular with locals. Nine out of 10 people we talked to said they enjoy the physical health and relaxation benefits of going there. Exploring the new wetland habitats gives people a lot of pleasure and half of those we spoke to have learnt more about wildlife and the natural environment. Nearby residents in West Auckland also rest easier when it rains – the new flood defence scheme protects 660 properties. Spring Gardens has been a catalyst for other local regeneration projects – long-term economic benefits are expected for communities throughout the Wear Valley.

## a better place to play



**When the coalmines shut, the Wear Valley's local economy was badly affected. Many areas suffered from social deprivation and the Wear Valley is still one of the 30 most economically deprived local authority districts in the country.**

The Haggerleazes branch line of the Stockton to Darlington railway started running through Spring Gardens in 1830, transporting coal from local mines to the port at Stockton.

The area reverted to farmland when the railway was abandoned in the sixties and in recent years local people stayed away. One female resident described the area at this time as “a bit of a mud pit”.

The River Gaunless snakes its way through the middle of Spring Gardens and down to the nearby village of West Auckland. In 1995 and 2000 the village suffered devastating floods, which affected 450 households and caused several million pounds worth of damage.

After the floods the Environment Agency looked at different options for flood defence schemes to protect the village. And the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs gave us the money to build a scheme on the proviso that local wildlife habitats improved as much as possible.

**“I think it's very beautiful here. People like to see what's been lost returning. Natural habitats are making a real comeback here.”**

**Paul Atkinson**  
Project Officer, Environment Agency



“I’m trying my new walking boots out. I’ve come out to practice because I’m going walking with school.”

**Bethany Colby**  
Local resident

#### **What did we do?**

We held events for local people to talk about the floods. Then we carried out an appraisal, which concluded that a dam should be built across the valley. So we invested £9 million building the 15 metre-high dam and today it makes an impressive sight.

The dam stores floodwater during heavy rain and lets it out gradually so that the river downstream doesn’t flood. It can block up to a million cubic meters of water, forming a kilometre-long lake upstream.

Telemetry equipment has been fitted inside the dam to monitor the height of the water. When the water starts to rise an alarm sounds in our Newcastle office, prompting our staff to come and check if any debris has collected on the grill, which acts as a giant sieve and protects the structure from damage.

Once the building work was complete, we invested a further £400,000 in wetland habitat creation. Over 10 hectares of land behind the dam were turned into new habitats using money from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

#### **Who did we work with?**

Partnership working has been vital to the success of Spring Gardens.

Managed by Natural England, the Mineral Valleys Project is a £5.2 million environmental regeneration programme that runs from 2003 to 2008. Supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Mineral Valleys is an umbrella organisation for 14 projects (including Accessing Wetlands and Beyond) and involves 50 organisations throughout the Wear Valley.

Creating the wet and dry wildflower meadows involved stripping rich topsoil from the fields and introducing new plant species, including woodland trees. We built a new path, with disabled access,

on the site of the old railway line. There is also a new wildlife trail running through the wetlands. Local people planted reeds and a chainsaw sculptor created a range of features including a giant crocodile. Groundwork West Durham and the Biodiversity Action Partnership also helped out with the project.

#### **What’s it like now?**

Spring Gardens has become a habitat-rich green area where the local community relaxes and exercises. More birds, plants, trees and wildlife than ever before are thriving here. People often see butterflies, barn owls and bats among the wetlands, meadowlands, wet woodlands, ponds and reedbeds.

The area has become rich in native trees including oak, ash, elder, rowan, willow, blackthorn, hawthorn and holly. Spring Gardens is full of regular dog walkers, ramblers, families, cyclists and joggers.



“We’re delighted, just delighted. The flood defence takes away the stress and the worry of flooding. It’s a better quality of life for people. It’s lovely and peaceful here. I feel safe as well.”

**Pauline Culpan**  
Local resident



“The Environment Agency purchased more land here and created habitats that help to soak up floodwater. It’s a very different approach and it’s very commendable.”

**Tony Devos**  
Communities and Communications Officer, Natural England

**What do local people think?**

Two thirds of people we spoke to thought the area is really bringing local communities together.

David Mulholland lives in nearby Bishop Auckland. “I used to walk up the old railway line but it’s a lot easier to get around now,” he says. “I’m going to fetch my Dad up at the weekend. I’m here checking it out for him today. He’s got one of those disability scooters.”

Sharon Hall, walking Cracker the dog, is also the local Parish Council Clerk. “I never used to come here before because it was just a boggy dirt track. Now in the summer it’s really good for seeing birds, there are loads about and they make lots of noise. It’s lovely.”

Brian Culpan and his wife Pauline come here to walk Tessie and Holly the dogs. Brian said: “We’re from South Yorkshire but we’re hoping to retire to the area. When the village flooded several years ago we were quite shocked. We couldn’t get out of the village because the main road was an absolute torrent. We came up here the other day to see what you’d been up to and we’re very impressed.”

For the full report on what local people and partners think of the improvements at Clayton Vale see <http://publications.environment-agency.gov.uk/epages/eapublications.storefront>

**What happens next?**

We are continually monitoring the progress of Spring Gardens’ habitats and species. We take fixed-point photographs from nine points in the site at the start of each new season and we’ll be doing this to chart its progress over the coming years.

The 3.1 kilometre stretch of path at Spring Gardens which runs between West Auckland and Ramshaw will become part of a much longer South West Durham corridor route linking Auckland to Barnard Castle.

When the wider Mineral Valley project opens up access to other areas along the route, local tourism is expected to receive a major boost and both farmers and B&B owners will be encouraged to diversify. In other areas B&B owners have kitted themselves out with cycle friendly equipment and this could also work here.



“Flood defence schemes like this make a huge difference to people’s lives. I’ve spoken to people who’ve been flooded who say that they never sleep when it rains...”

**Anne Lewis**  
Technical Officer, Environment Agency



“It gets you away from the traffic here. It’s just lovely. It’s just a really natural environment.”

**Sharon Hall**  
Local Parish Council Clerk

**Better places** tells the story of how we work with others to improve deprived communities and what this work means for local people.

For more information about Spring Gardens, contact **Anne Lewis** 01912 034120  
To find out more about Better Places, contact **Mark Funnell** 01454 205707

We would like to thank Natural England for its help with this project.



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