

COMMUNITY ENTERPRISE

Grimethorpe: no pit, no point

Rod Phillips, the community policeman in the erstwhile colliery town of Grimethorpe in South Yorkshire, says there used to be a code of practice among the local criminals - a burglars' charters, as it were.

"If you went robbing, you went to another village," said PC Phillips, sitting in the spanking new police post on the high street. "If you robbed on your own doorstep, the miners would sort you out, no recourse to the bobbies. But since the pit's gone, miners are demoralised. They've retreated indoors or to their allotments. No one sorts out the trouble-makers. And the bad lads've started robbing their own, friends, neighbours, relatives. In Grimethorpe, since the pit went, the scum has risen to the surface."

Last month Mandy Penny, a 25-year old single parent from Brighton Street, went out shopping in Barnsley. While she was gone, the bad lads broke in and took what little was worth taking. They left the front door open. Ms Penny returned to discover that her furniture was being removed by neighbouring children. She called the police. When a panda car arrived it was stoned. Ms Penny was attacked for being a grass and her sofa set on fire. She went into hiding.

On 8 September the police decided the local community had had enough and moved in. The 'Village' - an area of back-to-back terraces improbably named after seaside resorts - was sealed off by 100 police officers, some of them mounted. Nineteen people were arrested and a further 33 locals were picked up later, remanded for a cocktail of crimes ranging from burglary to GBH.

That raid was the culmination of a change that has overtaken Grimethorpe in the past year. There used to be a point to this town up a cul-de-sac four miles from Barnsley. The polish and dedication of its world-famous brass band seemed to stand for the town itself. In the sixties, 2,500 people were employed in its colliery; when the mine shut in 1993, the place was emasculated, cut off from productive society. A recent survey discovered that less than 5 per cent of the adult population works at the Village works. The rest struggle by on benefits, topped up, for many, by what they can pick up around the place. Strolling down Margate Street, you see shaven-headed under-fives in ancient Sheffield Wednesday shirts carrying bike tyres, tin cans,

bits of old sack, like kindergarten bagmen. This is the scavenging economy, vulture culture.

"At night you have to batten down the hatches," said one Village resident. "You can feel them crawling over your property. They'll nick anything you don't nail down: kids' toys, the washing off your line, your garden fence."

Round the back of Brighton Street, where every fifth house is boarded up or burnt out, huge dogs yelp and snarl from backyards, dogs that don't appear to get out much.

"Aye," said a man hammering at a kennel roof. "If you took dog out for a walk, you'd get robbed while you were gone."

The police operation was warmly received by the locals. One elderly man who lives in the Village area said that the night after the round-up he slept for the first time in three years.

"There were two gangs of youths making everyone's lives a misery. With no discipline of work, they were out all night, every night, roguing. The place became nocturnal," said Chief Superintendent Peter Hale, of South Yorkshire Police. "There are a lot of decent Grimethorpe people suffering who deserved our support and they got it."

David Milner, who runs one of three post offices serving a benefit-dependent community of 3,500 said: "Everyone is delighted that the out-of-control hard core

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have been lifted. It's been like a holiday since they've gone. The media says trouble is due to pit shutting. That narks, because it suggests the miners are doing the roguing. Not true. I think what happened was when the pit shut, the rogues - lads who'd never worked - stripped the place and police did nowt. They got the impression they were above the law, and they just started to do what they liked. The operation stopped it for a while, took a load off the streets. But the hangers-on are back at it."

Over the road from Mr Milner's establishment lies the site of the colliery. On a crisp autumnal day last week, half a dozen people were picking over the corpse of the old pithead, now just a tumble of bricks and dust. Several men were piling

SECURITY WORK

Barnsley Area

£1.50 an hour

Bring your own dog

up scraps of electrical wiring. What were they up to?

"Earning a living same as you," said one of them, a man in his sixties with no teeth, who was stripping the coating off the wire in search of saleable scraps of copper, perhaps. What price do they get?

"Whatever you can."

Did they do this every day?

"Who are you? DSS?"

Two hundred yards behind the wire crew, dozens of teenagers crawled over the heaps containing the 40,000 tons of cut coal left when the mine shut. They filled sacks, which were transported away by fleets of men on grubby motorbikes. Some had industrialised the process, stealing quad bikes from local farms and shifting coal by the trailer-load. You could tell the new coal workers, around the Village: they were filthy and moved everywhere at speed.

It is energy like that which convinces a handful of optimists that Grimethorpe has a future. The old British Coal headquarters on the high street has just been restored into the plush Acorn Centre. Due to open in November, the centre houses dozens of community enterprises from solvent abuse counselling to the headquarters of the Grimethorpe Colliery brass band. It is managed by Andy Kershaw, an ebullient social worker from Sheffield.

"We have to accept that what we are doing there is only applying sticking plaster," he said. "This is a community which has lost its self-confidence, become benefit dependent, had all its choices taken away. We have to winkle them out of their shells, make them realise they can contribute and that have a lot to offer."

In conjunction with Barnsley College, Andy Kershaw's initiatives centre around education, building up a workforce which could attract a hi-tech investor, similar to the electronics plant now sited on Cortonwood colliery, near Barnsley, where the 1984 miners' strike began. His centre is packed with opportunities, to retrain, to pass the time, to funnel the muscular energy in a productive way.

COUNTING THE COST

"This is Gaz," he said, opening a door in one wing of the centre. "Grimethorpe Activity Zone. Where the kids can come and do their own thing. There has been nowhere like it before. This could transform lives."

Out of the Gaz window, half a dozen ragged ponies were grazing on the old slag-heap. Did they belong to gypsies?

"You don't get gypsies round here," smiled Andy Kershaw. "They'd get all their stuff nicked."

The Acorn Centre has received funds from Barnsley Council, the EC, J Paul Getty, Comic Relief. Everyone - with the exception of central government - seems keen to try to help Grimethorpe to re-establish itself. The enterprising, the bright, the law-abiding may well, sooner or later, benefit from the retraining, support and enthusiasm available from the Centre's tireless staff.

But the challenge is can they - can anyone - do anything for the hard-core, the unsocialised, the marooned? You can imagine few Japanese electronics giants opening their doors to the scavengers picking over the corpse of the colliery last week.

"We may have to face up to the fact that, for whatever reason, we have bred a lost generation," said Tony Heatherington, the local parish priest. "A generation that has never and will never work and has lost all the social structures that go with work. The tragedy is the solution is not in their hands. Ultimately only a major economic miracle will save them."

At the moment, the only thing anyone can think to do with the inconvenients is to take the Michael Howard approach: lock them up. "All we hope is that the courts keep them out of here," said Dave Milner. "It's about time someone else realised what we have to live with."

But when the boys return to Grimethorpe from doing time, no one - not the police, not the social workers, not their neighbours in the Village - expects them to do anything other than return to a life of night-time nefariousness.

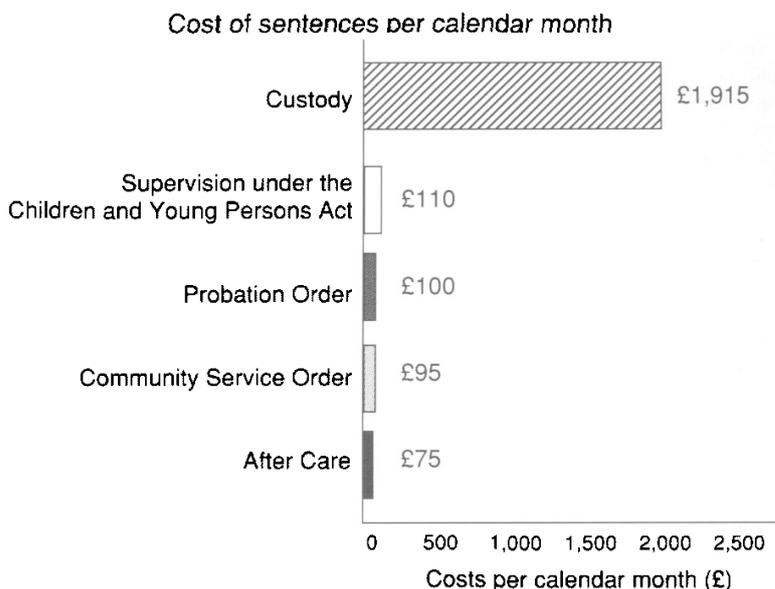
A trip to the local job centre would explain why. Last week there was one vacancy advertised on the noticeboard.

"Security work, Barnsley area," the postcard read. "£1.50 an hour. Bring your own dog."

Jim White is a journalist on the Independent, where this piece was first published on 12th October 1994. Many thanks for permission to reproduce it here.

Public expenditure: cost of sentence in 1992

The average costs of custody per inmate month was £1,915 in 1991/92. Costs were highest in dispersal prisons, open youth establishments and female establishments. The cost of community sentences were between £95 and £110 per calendar month.



Source: Information on the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales. Digest 2. Edited by Gordon C Barclay, Home Office Research & Statistics Department 1993

"We continue to give priority to increasing the number of prison places to accommodate offenders we expect to be sentenced to custody. 4,000 extra places will be provided by 1997-98. 2,800 of them will be built by the Prison Service. Alongside this direct public investment, we are evaluating tenders for the first two privately financed prisons - due to provide 1,200 places in 1997-98.

"In addition, I plan to open two more private prisons in 1998-99. The Prison Service hopes the first of these will be at Agecroft in Manchester.

"The passage of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 enables us to move ahead on providing secure training centres for persistent juvenile offenders. These training centres will be provided using private finance. We will invite tenders for the centres as soon as we have obtained planning permission."

Michael Howard, Home Secretary, November 1994