

Model village

Ben Holden visits The Wintles, a community-led development in Shropshire, and discovers how people and place before profit makes for a special scheme

As my car weaved through the lanes of the rolling Shropshire Hills, I got the sense that this was very ancient land. Every tree, field, and hedgerow seemed like it had a story to tell – the landscape alive and me a mere visitor to its hallowed ground.

I had journeyed to the hill town of Bishop's Castle close to the English-Welsh border, which was probably an indication of why the place feels so rich and full of history. I closed my eyes and it was easy to imagine indigenous Celts fighting tooth and nail against the incoming Roman invaders to maintain their community-based and spiritual way of life.

The Romans brought with them an enormous capacity for progress and technological advancement, but also a deeply patriarchal and individualistic culture that systematically dismembered the 'old ways'. At its root, it was simple imperialism. Perhaps it was at this time that we started to lose the memory of how to build and live in community. Did progress get prioritised over people?

It is this history with which I drew a parallel on my visit to a small housing development on the outskirts of the town, named The Wintles.

The curious part of this visit was, however, that I was not actually visiting a brand-new community. The Wintles is the legacy of Bob Tomlinson and Carole Salmon, who

designed and built the 42-home development during the first decade of the 2000s. Tomlinson is releasing a book about his experiences and the journey of the development to inspire others.

With the sun shining, the environment really was a feast for the senses: birds singing, trees awakened from their winter slumber, and the warm, sweet smell of blossom. This is a vibrant place, and the total antithesis of a standard, nature-devoid, housing estate.

There are no straight lines in The Wintles. The architecture draws its influence from the historic design of nearby Bishop's Castle, which is gloriously unstructured, with nooks, crannies and alleyways criss-crossing the streets.

The enchanting layout of The Wintles continues with the second big differentiator of the site: there is no tarmac. Tomlinson says that after months and months of pushing back against the planners and highways, they were able to compromise on a small tarmac lane around the outside of the site's boundary with the rest of the vehicle access through the middle of the houses on gravel and shingle. This means that emergency services are still able to reach every house easily, but the overall feel of the development prioritises the safety and wellbeing of the residents. People first, car second.

Strolling around with Tomlinson, I started to notice that most of the



Ben Holden (left) with Bob Tomlinson

houses have porches and the layout of the housing is clustered into small groups around a communal green space. Indeed, the tour took some time because we naturally bumped into residents who were enjoying the sunshine on their porches and terraces or walking through one of the myriad footpaths that wind and weave romantically through the development's area. The air was one of conviviality and spontaneity.

The design actually creates and reinforces community cohesion. This is a living, breathing example of what behavioural economists Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein would call





'nudge theory' – those small, inexpensive, and intentional design choices that can alter people's behaviour for the better.

In a vote of confidence of the development's success, many of the original residents are still living there 20 years later, and houses that do come onto the market have increased in value well beyond the market rate for other surrounding new-build properties. This is a

demonstration that placemaking and stewardship decision-making can and do lead to increased sales values alongside enhanced community satisfaction. The two are most definitely familiar and comfortable bedfellows.

I was grateful to be invited into a resident's house for a cup of tea and learned more about the structure of the community ownership. Through a communal management company, every household owns a part of the freehold and can play a role in the management of the green spaces. There are pretty ponds, which double as natural drainage and flood mitigation infrastructure, a huge community orchard, and a lively shared allotments garden.

The community is strong because everyone has a genuine sense of psychological and financial ownership of The Wintles. There is passion about protecting and enhancing the place in which they live. It was vital to learn that this does not always come easy, and that the building and running of a community takes real graft.

It is no utopia, but in the relating and the dialogue and the occasional conflict come the seeds of ongoing relationship between neighbours. This is human life; it is mixed, messy, and oh so normal. But at The Wintles it works effectively and the results 20 years on are plain to see: a thriving, beautiful, and resilient community.

Despite seeing the fruits of Tomlinson and Salmon's labours achieved in spite of a difficult market at the time, as well as bank lending practices around the global financial crisis, one fact from my visit left me astonished: since completion, almost 20 years ago, Village Makers (the company they set up to replicate this approach) has not delivered another project.

So, why not? Tomlinson says one of the biggest blockers to progress had been landowners pulling out of deals at the last moment when the allure of the larger and quicker pay cheque came knocking from bigger and better capitalised developers.

The Wintles has such a beautiful feeling and is clearly beloved among its residents. As I drove away, a lingering question remained. How do we make the economic and political environment sympathetic so that schemes like The Wintles can proliferate?

The Village Makers have clearly delivered something extraordinary, and I would recommend any landowner, masterplanner, or developer, seeing it for themselves. It feels like the time is now for more developments to emulate what has been achieved at The Wintles. Good placemaking equals better living and better sales. Who can argue with that? 🌳