



Words & photograph Matthew Sutcliffe

Who you gonna call?

PC Kath Juckes and the
Birch Green Dirt Busters

How does one person's desire to bring a little nature back into her life end up with the police, fire brigade, local businesses, council workers and volunteers removing three hundred tons of litter and debris from a small stream in Lancashire?

John and Maureen Fleet live in the Birch Green area of Skelmersdale. Theirs is the fifth house from the end in long row of identical homes built in the 1960s, when planners across the country were experimenting with 'new towns'.

For John and Maureen, arriving in Skelmersdale in 1977, it seemed idyllic. The planners left patches of nature undisturbed amongst the estates and when the Fleets moved to Birch Green in 1981, if Maureen left the bedroom window open she could hear a stream bubbling along through Westhead Clough, less than a hundred yards away.

But Skelmersdale has not turned out the way it was supposed to. Low employment and a host of other problems meant that cracks were soon showing in its utopian vision. Over the years the clough became neglected and choked with rubbish. Maureen just wanted to hear the stream again.

John and Maureen are chairman and secretary of the Birch Green Estate Management Board. If there was a nerve centre to the operation to clean up the clough, it was their kitchen table. Visiting members of the Birch Green Dirt Busters, as they have become known, find that hot drinks and biscuits are in constant supply and there's always a bowl of sweets on the table.

And if there was a key individual in this team effort, it was PC Kath Juckes, community beat manager in Birch Green for the last three years. Kath Juckes is exactly the kind of bobby people want more of on the beat. Everyone on her patch knows her and she knows everyone. She's down to earth and friendly but can also be stern, in a manner befitting an officer of the law.

"Kath was the motivator," says Judith Allnutt of the Mersey Basin Campaign, who helped organise the clean up. "She was very good at getting groups involved and getting them to give what we needed, and she persuaded them to provide all sorts of extras. She was the one who mobilised everybody."

As Kath Juckes explains: "I volunteered for the estate management team with John and Maureen and they roped me in to help clean up the clough."

Years of fly-tipping had covered the clough under a huge pile of rubbish. "On top of the silt and natural debris there were stolen motor bikes, couches, mattresses, fridges, beds and shopping trolleys – you name it, we had it," says Kath.

Excavating it all from the clough with virtually no funding was no simple matter. The success of an earlier, smaller clean up encouraged people to get involved, but even so people had to be cajoled and favours called in. Local volunteers and school children pitched in and the local Asda, Lidl and Farm

of work all told, which I mean is absolutely phenomenal."

Having the clough looking better seemed to get people thinking. Says Kath: "People were out washing the fronts of their houses and wiping the windows, and you don't see that very often – and it's continued."

The changes didn't go unnoticed. "It put Birch Green on the map quite frankly because once we uncovered the water feature the press came and took photos, and then Radio Lancashire got involved. The media coverage went on for weeks."

Kath continues, "In the end, even the people who started off

"Kath was the motivator. She was the one who got everybody moving."

Foods helped to feed the volunteers. United Utilities, the Northwest's water company, also helped out, as did the Environment Agency. So too did the fire brigade, who blasted clean a water feature that had been put into the stream bed when Birch Green was built. Lost beneath silt and rubbish for fourteen years, its re-emergence brought back childhood memories for many local people.

West Lancs District Council also came up trumps in the person of its ground maintenance manager, Gary Peter. He sent workmen to help with the clean up and to cut back the privets and trees around the stream. He also encouraged local contractors to get involved in the three-week long effort.

"Joe Lidel from Ribble Reclamation gave us a JCB and someone to drive it for six days at no cost," says Kath Juckes. "We estimate we did about twenty thousand pounds worth

saying it was a waste of time became very positive. There's still some fly-tipping, but nothing like what it was."

As John Fleet says, "We've got to try and educate people about the environment. And it's not an easy thing. The majority of people are decent, it's just the odd one who doesn't care where they live. We've just got to try and put some pride back into people's lives."

MORE INFORMATION:

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