John North: The story of the village that would not die

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The village that refused to die today marks another stage in its near-miraculous resurrection. Witton Park has been down, kicked when it was down, allowed remission only when its aggressors hurried to find bigger boots. It was the community, said an ill-remembered county planning officer, that neither could nor should have a future.

It was insanitary and unseemly, enormously overcrowded and absurdly under-funded - and yet it remained home to an awful lot of good neighbours.

Published today, the book which colourfully chronicles that near-death experience is called Forever Paradise. "Witton Park," it begins, "is one of the best loved villages in England."

For almost 150 years, however, it can hardly have been said to have been heaven on earth.

Paradise was the name of the site on which Bolckow and Vaughan built their ironworks in 1846, with the accurate prediction of 2,000 jobs.

The Wear Valley, said John Vaughan at the opening ceremony, had often been spoken of for its beauties. When he saw smoke emanating from tall chimneys, he could not help exclaim that the beauties were much enhanced.
The ironworks belched for 38 years, houses hurriedly thrown up all around, pubs on every thirsting corner. The gutters overflowed with beer, says the book - and often, very likely, with those who drank it, an' all.

"Witton Park in its heyday was contemporary with the American Wild West, and every bit as lawless," says the book. "It was certainly not the safest place on earth, but among the most exciting."

The ironmasters left, the houses and the workers largely remained. The puddlers were in the clarts.

There were soup kitchens and there was starvation, rag-arsed kids, begging parents, scenes that were to be repeated many times during dark days and depression.

The only time they formed a Witton Park Defence Association, however, was when authority wanted to obliter ate their homes for ever.

One by one, the long terraces were demolished, their inhabitants mostly transported to the Woodhouse Close estate at Bishop Auckland, two or three miles away. Witton Park folk unequivocally called it The Reservation.

All this is recalled in Forever Paradise. It may be, as the book says, that no one locked their doors because there was nothing worth pinching, but they padlocked their rain butts because fresh water was so precious.
Durham County Council’s iniquitous Category D policy had condemned 121 villages, of which Witton Park was the largest. When it was overturned in the 1970s, Witton Park had almost disappeared beneath its dead-hand diktat.

Now the village by the River Wear is vibrant again. There is smart new housing, proper planning, a new-born air of optimism.

No one wanted to live in the slums to start with, simply to be allowed to start afresh where they were. At last, day by day, it is happening. Paradise regained.

The book has been compiled by cousins Keith Belton and Ken Biggs and by Witton Park-born Dale Daniel, with whom we had a couple of pints on Monday.

The trio have also compiled a Forever Paradise CD - 1,200 photographic images, poems, essays and the rich scrapbook of cuttings garnered by the late Clarrie Simon, these newspapers' penny-a-line correspondent in those parts.

"They just knock me out, I stay up at night reading them," says Dale.

Ken, he supposes, was the technological mastermind without whom nothing would have been possible; Keith, now in Stockton but from long Witton Park generations, was the historian.

"I'm the historian's labourer," says Dale, but it was he who principally organised The Gathering, a rapturous reunion which two years ago drew 2,000 people back to the village.
"A day for embracing the inglorious past," the column observed at the time.

Dale, 56, is now in Bishop Auckland. "Like many more, I was chucked out of Witton Park," he says.

"They bulldozed the bottom streets, then the top streets and when only Black Road was left, there was soon no room for anyone else."

Originally they planned just a handful of books - "one each for us three, a copy for the schools and libraries". Now there are 1,000, among the most vivid village histories ever encountered. The schools got their copies yesterday.

"It's for posterity," says Dale. "If it's simply a reminder to never again try to destroy communities like they did with Witton Park, then its purpose will have been served."