EXPLORING COMMUNITY
THE ASHLANDS * PORTISHEAD

BARTON WILLMORE
Introduction

Twenty-three years ago Barton Willmore was appointed by the Portishead Quays consortium, comprising Crest Nicholson and Persimmon Homes, to work with North Somerset Council to regenerate The Ashlands, one of the largest brownfield sites in the South West, with the intention of delivering a thriving new community that would revive Portishead’s industrial heartland.

The main road that runs through the new community in Portishead is called Phoenix Way and for good reason - the 1,650 dwellings are built on top of an immense pile of ash, the waste from two former power stations nearby. This new community has literally risen from the ashes as part of a wider regeneration of the industrial docks in Portishead and now comprises 4,300 new homes, marina, district centre, employment, shops, restaurants and cafe’s as well as a 40 hectare nature reserve, play areas and open spaces.
As Town Planners, Urban Designers, Masterplanners, Landscape Designers and Architects in the design and delivery of this scheme since its inception, Barton Willmore worked closely with Persimmon Homes, Crest Nicholson and other developers including: Taylor Wimpey, Charles Church, Barratt Homes, Pegasus Life and Knightstone Housing to deliver the project.

Our guidebook has been produced to highlight the success of this dramatic transformation of a challenging brownfield site into the exciting new community you see today. It aims to walk you through the vision that was developed 23 years ago and is now being lived and breathed by thousands of people.

We hope you enjoy the journey…

Simon Prescott
Planning Partner, Barton Willmore
In 1870-72, John Marius Wilson’s Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales described Portishead like this:

“PORTISHEAD, or Portshead popularly Posseta village and a parish in Bedminster district, Somerset. The village stands on the Severn’s estuary, under wooded hills, at the end of Wans dyke, and at the terminus of the Bristol and Portishead railway, opposite King’s Road, 3¼ miles W S W of the mouth of the river Avon, and 9 W by N of Bristol; is supposed to have been anciently the harbour of Portbury; is now a watering-place, with a gay assemblage of villas; commands a charming view over the Severn’s estuary to the coast and mountains of Wales; and has a post-office under Clevedon, a railway-station, a handsome hotel, and marine baths.
A steamer plies daily, in summer, to Bristol: and magnificent plans have been entertained for forming a series of docks, on a scale suitable for ocean steamers. The parish contains also the hamlet of North-Weston; and comprises 2,093 acres of land, and 295 of water. Real property, £7,771. Pop. in 1851, 1,084; in 1861, 1,201. Houses, 250. A fort was formerly at P. Point; was taken from the royalists, in 1645, by Fairfax; and has left some remains. Ancient camp was in the parish, 1,200 feet by 600; and also has left some remains. The living is a rectory in the diocese of Bath and Wells. Value, £729. Patron, the Rev. F. Norman. The church is early English; and consists of nave, aisle, and chancel, with a fine tower. There are chapels for Independents, Quakers, and Wesleyans, a national school, and charities £5.”
The town of Portishead has a long history as a fishing port and for the past 200 years as a dock. Two coal-fed Power Stations were built next to the dock in 1926 and 1949 and these were closed in the 1970s and 1980s at which time all industrial activities at the dock ceased.

The closure of the power stations and associated dockside industry left a challenging but exciting opportunity. Across its 67 hectares, 48 hectares were heavily contaminated, having been subject to landfill of ash and clinker by-products from the power stations. Focussed around the docks however, extensive waterside development opportunities, plus a great, well connected location made this a prime site for the south west.
Nigel Jones-Gerrard, Technical Director at Persimmon; “There will always be pessimistic and optimistic views on what unknown challenges a site might present but here we had a unique site and a unique opportunity, which provided us with a clear direction. Having said that, the combination of former uses and their activities did leave a unique cocktail of contaminants and other constraints in the ground that were a real challenge and there was a long list of underground constraints including shafts and tunnels, utilities, oil, asbestos and phosphorous.”
In 1990 drums of stored phosphorus caught fire in one of the industrial buildings which resulted in a massive phosphorous cloud covering over 15 miles. This potential danger of heavy industry located next to a residential area was the real catalyst to regenerating the site.

This type of development requires a large amount of upfront cost to buy the land, undertake the necessary remediation works and build the necessary infrastructure. Persimmon did not receive any financial assistance from outside agencies but instead benefitted from a good working partnership with the Local Authority (North Somerset Council) which enabled the release of adjacent greenfield land for development, and thereby provided the necessary cash flow to fund the remediation and preparation of the brownfield element.
The Place

Our vision was to create a community with a distinctive character and sense of place.

Paul Davis, Strategic Land Director, Persimmon: “The overall objective has been one of achieving quality and distinctiveness. The vision evolved over time and it is the unique combination of elements such as the dockside and the proximity to the Severn Estuary which have provided inspiration for the distinctive character areas. I believe this evolution was key to the successful delivery of a high quality scheme, enabling us to respond and adapt over the long time period.”

The design approach and vision for Portishead Docks was developed in the mid to late 1990s. It reflected a move at that time to a more design-focused approach to new residential communities. The Commission for
Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) was established in 1999, and by 2000 had published two important documents: ‘By Design – Urban Design in the Planning System’ and ‘Urban Design Compendium,’ clearly showing a step-change in the design approach to new developments.

At Portishead Docks and The Ashlands we fully embraced this new agenda and the development as one of the first in the country to be designed to this standard. The approach focused on achieving good urban design and placemaking, through the delivery of high quality streets, spaces and places throughout the entire development.

The successful delivery of this vision was the responsibility of a number of key players including the Portishead Quays Consortium and North Somerset Council.
our VISION ...

... to create a distinctive character and sense of place

THE ASHLANDS, PORTISHEAD
Explore the place

This walkable guide aims to provide context to the urban form of this substantial site. The icons opposite are used to highlight the unique and interesting features that are part of the individual areas. We hope you enjoy the journey...
Illustrative Map

Our illustrative map enables you to navigate your way around the site, picking out each area’s unique features. Look out for the area map on each page!
The Avenue

A formal avenue links the entrance gateway. The Avenue is wide - over 30 metres - allowing for large front gardens set behind the tree-lined route, creating a garden suburb character. The width also allows for both on-street parking, separate footpaths and the cycleway.

The homes lining The Avenue consist of short terraces (two - three storeys) which are strong enough architecturally to enclose the street space.

From The Avenue the main route passes between crescent shaped buildings which act as a gateway on to The Village Green.
The Gateway

A pair of three storey apartment buildings provide an entrance gateway to The Village Green beyond. Their crescent-shaped plan, alignment of key buildings and landscaping provides a formality, which contrasts with the informal nature of The Village Green beyond.
The Village Green

The Village Green is deliberately more informal and relaxed and is in keeping with the tradition of English village greens. The contoured green spaces define and dominate the character of The Village Green.

A mixture of linked and detached mainly two storey terraced homes enclose the series of greens. Small front gardens defined by low walls and fences front directly on to the green spaces.
The Village Common

A simple rectangular space enlivened by a colourful engaging play area and contoured, landscaped banks, create a village common in the heart of the site.
The Village Square

The Village Square lies on the main route through the site and just 200 meters from the edge of the marina. The small urban square provides small retail units and an extra care facility incorporating a hairdressers and other community facilities. The square is framed by houses, flats and live/work units. The public art and landscaping create an exciting and lively urban square.
The Seafront Development

To maximise the opportunity at this prime location, development at the seafront begins to intensify, providing some of the site’s tallest buildings. These rise to seven storeys, dropping to three storeys on the edges, opening on to the adjacent nature reserve.

Curved terraces of apartments and houses give superb views out over the estuary, echoing the traditional British seaside architectural language of Georgian and Victorian times, while a new ‘lighthouse’ echoes that in the fishing village of Port Marine.
Old Sea Bank Terraces

The Old Sea Bank is virtually the only historical feature in the area, offering an interesting topographical phenomenon covered with rich vegetation which has developed over many years. With the top of the bank some six metres higher than the green fields below, it offers superb views southwards over the landscape as far as the Tickenham Ridge. This sense of place has been reinforced by a series of gently curved terraces, echoing the curve of the sea bank and maximsing the views.
The Rural Edge & Country Lane

Here we find the lowest density area on The Ashlands development. A relatively small number of larger dwellings create the scale and massing to reflect the character of the surrounding villages, whilst their larger rear gardens allow adjoining landscape to be drawn into the development.

The Country Lane is an essential design element, creating an informal meandering loop through the development, touching all parts of it including the Rural Edge.
Dockside

Fronting the newly created marina, a variety of contemporary apartments form the Dockside development. Building massing and a selection of materials have been used to create a harmonious dockside character.

The apartments are set back and raised slightly above the dockside public realm for privacy. Most of the apartments directly front the marina or have views over adjoining landscaped spaces with mixed use development below. Shops, bars, restaurants and offices are all accommodated on the ground floor.
Public Art

The public art is an integral part of The Ashlands development and makes a significant contribution to the sense of place and community. The comprehensive public art strategy was inspired by the history of the site and the 27 pieces are arranged in a trail within the community, located in key spaces and focal points. They include giant horse shoe nails (referencing the factory that used to be on the site) which are used as play equipment by local children and an ‘Arch of Angels’ reflecting the five radio towers that were on the site.
YOU CAN LEARN MORE BY VISITING WWW.PUBLICARTPORTISHEAD.CO.UK
Place-Making

Building a place, creating a community...what makes Portishead special is its residents. A few of the residents have their say on why they chose to make The Ashlands their home.
THE PARKER FAMILY
The Ashlands is a great place to live for young people, families and the older generation and has a great mixed community. Everyday facilities such as a school, post office and convenience shop are all provided within the community as well as pubs and cafes on the marina. There is a network of open and green spaces with some fantastic and unique pieces of public art. The cycling and walking routes all loop round the site and provide some great cycling opportunities for the kids. The architectural design, which is inspired by the seaside location, gives the place a distinctive identity. Rigby the guinea pig loves it here too!
I am very comfortable in my spacious, modern flat in Waverley Court - where help is always available if needed.

My ceiling-to-floor window helps my pot plants to flourish and gives me the pleasure of watching the children scooter to school.

We are surrounded by a variety of Portishead’s attractions - a choice of shops nearby, the high street, the marina, the nature reserve, Portishead in Bloom, stylish Christmas decorations, fascinating sculptures, the raft race (a yearly event unique to Portishead) and a post office just across the road in the village quarter.
Matt and Louis
I have lived in my apartment, which is close to the marina, for nearly two years. The location and area are great, with the high street and shops only a couple of minutes’ walk away, which is really handy for me as I work from home. I regularly make the most of the local bars and restaurants around the marina with friends as it has a great atmosphere and lots going on. My dog Louis loves walks around the nature reserve too!
JANET AND RON
WE HAVE LIVED IN PORTISHEAD FOR THE BEST PART OF 40 YEARS AND RECENTLY MOVED FROM UP ON THE HILL TO THE MARINA DEVELOPMENT.

HAVING SO MANY FACILITIES ON OUR DOORSTEP AND BEING ABLE TO WALK TO THE SHOPS, LIBRARY, SPORTS CENTRE ETC. IS A REAL BONUS. WE LOVE TAKING EVENING STROLLS AROUND THE MARINA AND GRABBING A BITE TO EAT IN ONE OF THE CAFES AND RESTAURANTS ON THE WATERFRONT!

WE HAVE WATCHED THE TOWN GROW OVER THE YEARS AND HAVE BEEN REALLY IMPRESSED HOW THE NEW HAS BEEN INTEGRATED WITH THE OLD. WE FEEL THE DEVELOPMENT HAS WELCOMED BOTH LOCAL RESIDENTS WANTING A CHANGE AND PEOPLE WHO ARE MOVING INTO PORTISHEAD FROM OTHER AREAS.

WITH EXCELLENT TRANSPORT LINKS TO BRISTOL AND TALK OF THE TRAIN STATION PROGRESSING, WE CAN SEE PORTISHEAD BECOMING AN EVEN MORE ATTRACTIVE OPTION FOR PEOPLE OF ALL AGES TO LIVE.
THE HASELDINE FAMILY
The Ashlands is a great place to raise a family and we love being able to cycle and walk safely on the many paths that connect the development with the nature reserve, Marina and High Street of Portishead. The boys especially like exploring the Nature Reserve’s many paths looking for wildlife along the way and recently went on a toad patrol mission with their local beaver pack!

I have lived in Portishead for over 40 years and feel that the Ashlands has really brought to life an area of land that was derelict for many years, integrating the old and new parts of Portishead. With small businesses and shops opening on the Marina, we have many facilities on our doorstep and like to support local businesses whenever possible.
A view from those involved

John Tranter
Architectural Director at Barton Willmore (Now Retired)

To design a development of 1,650 homes where individual residents would experience a clear sense of place was very tricky. This was initially achieved through a very strong masterplan which gave a clear logic to the layout, in terms of hierarchy of circulation, definition of character areas, and maximising the unique qualities of this site.

This comprehensive masterplan, along with exceptional ongoing liaison between North Somerset planners, the consortium and its designers enabled these initial objectives to be retained and in some cases enhanced, through the implementation stage of the project.

The Ashlands, or Village Quarter as its residents now refer to it, has a distinct character derived from the successful translation of the original design aspirations through to reality, over a period of 15 years, demonstrating what can be achieved through cooperation and commitment.
Paul Davies,
Strategic Land Director at Persimmon

It is the unique combination of ingredients that have made this an attractive place to live - the seaside location; the marina; the public art trail; the 40 hectare nature reserve, as well as the new amenities that have been provided which include a Waitrose, new restaurants, bars and cafes, new quality parks and play areas. The new marina facilities are all connected by a network of safe and vibrant routes that make this a very attractive place for a wide range of people. The wide range of dwelling types which include hundreds of apartments around the marina as well as larger family homes, provides for a vibrant mixed community. There are also a number of celebrities that live within the development including actor Johnny Briggs and comedian Eddie Large.

Kedrick Davies,
Urban Designer for North Somerset Council (1998 - 2008)

The scheme was a hugely challenging, but rewarding project to work on. The Ashlands was far more challenging than the Port Marine site. With Port Marine, we had the Marina to work with, but The Ashlands site was a huge area, a flat wasteland with no identity. Working with various developers, we had to overcome a variety of obstacles such as creating a distinctive and legible environment in order to help control and assist the design team. The planning process was proactive and encouraged innovative solutions. Allowing time for design was essential to the success of the scheme, as design is an evolutionary process and the scheme needed to provide a base and a mechanism for that to happen.
Avril Chadwick
Design Director at Barton Willmore

I believe the success of The Ashlands as a great place to live flows from the close working relationship of the team, together with the common goal to create a great place; and what a great place it is!

Underlying the team’s close working relationship was the commitment to design. The character areas - the specific spaces and places where design would be concentrated was the main reason for the project’s success. The character areas did not sprawl across vast acres of land, but were local and focused spaces that would be linked together by the main circulation routes. The architectural response was concentrated in these areas and development outside these spaces was unassertive in scale, character and materials. Now the development is complete this approach has created a real sense of place and orientation for residents and visitors.

With the common goal of creating a great place, the process was simple. A regular series of design workshops were held on site, the outcomes of which fed directly into a series of design statements to explain each character area. The design statements were brief documents, largely supported by artists’ impressions and street scenes of the key character elements. Where the reserved matters submissions reflected these documents, approval was secured relatively quickly. North Somerset Council working with Kedrick Davies (Urban Designer appointed by the council to oversee the design process) were able to see the potential of the site and pushed the design agenda, but appreciated the realities for the developer and the limitations of achieving this level of bespoke design for all 1,650 houses. As the site developed, it was clear that the principles developed at the design workshops had been successfully translated into the built form.

There are parts of the development where we can learn lessons. However The Ashlands community, with its colour, character and sense of identity has created a place where people love to live.
The Avenue
DOCKSIDE
THE SEAFRONT DEVELOPMENT
Old Sea Bank Terraces
MARINA
EATING AND DRINKING
NATURE RESERVE
The gateway
Battery Point Lighthouse
THE SEAFRONT DEVELOPMENT
VILLAGE CENTRE
THE OVAL
THE COMMON
VILLAGE GREEN
THE AVENUE
THE GATEWAY
PRIMARY SCHOOL
OLD SEABANK TERRACES
THE RURAL EDGE & COUNTRY LANE
THE ASHLANDS, PORTISHEAD