

THE DALBY FOREST PROJECT : INCORPORATING URBAN VALUES AND
AESTHETICS INTO A REGIONAL CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE FOR SUSTAINABLE
ECONOMIC ACTIVITY – A UK CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Dalby Forest is part of the North Riding of Yorkshire Forest Park. It covers some 47 sq km and was planted up in the 1920's mainly with softwoods as one of the early commercial timber forests of the UK Forestry Commission.

In the last quarter of the 20th century, the Forest became a popular destination for urban visitors from the surrounding urban conurbations. Simple facilities were provided to accommodate the growing number of visitors, including the conversion of an estate office to provide a small visitor centre and shop, interpreted footpaths and camping facilities, and a 16 km 'forest drive'. The ambience was one of a 'rural estate', there to 'educate' the urban dweller in the ways of the forest.

The market for Dalby's timber became depressed in the 1990's and, for the first time, income from recreation exceed that from timber. Accordingly, the Dalby Project was set up. The aim of this phased project was to create a new, contemporary Visitor Centre as the focus of a package designed to improve and develop the forest as a 'Regional Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Economic Activity'. Now largely completed at a cost of over €10 million, the project has enhanced the existing regional tourism product, attracted high growth and high spends within the local area, offering both opportunities for business and employment in the nearby market towns and villages.

This paper will describe the scope of the Dalby Project, and explain why it was necessary – initially in the teeth of considerable local opposition – to design the project with more of an urbanist feel, using London-based architects, rather than as the more predictable delicate, rural intervention. This approach proved to be fully justified when the new Visitor Centre building won the UK Prime Minister's 'Public Building of the Year Award 2007'.

Key words

Dalby Forest Project, Centre of Excellence, urban values.