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Review

Stockport Green A-Z

Section 1: Brinnington, Reddish and the Heatons

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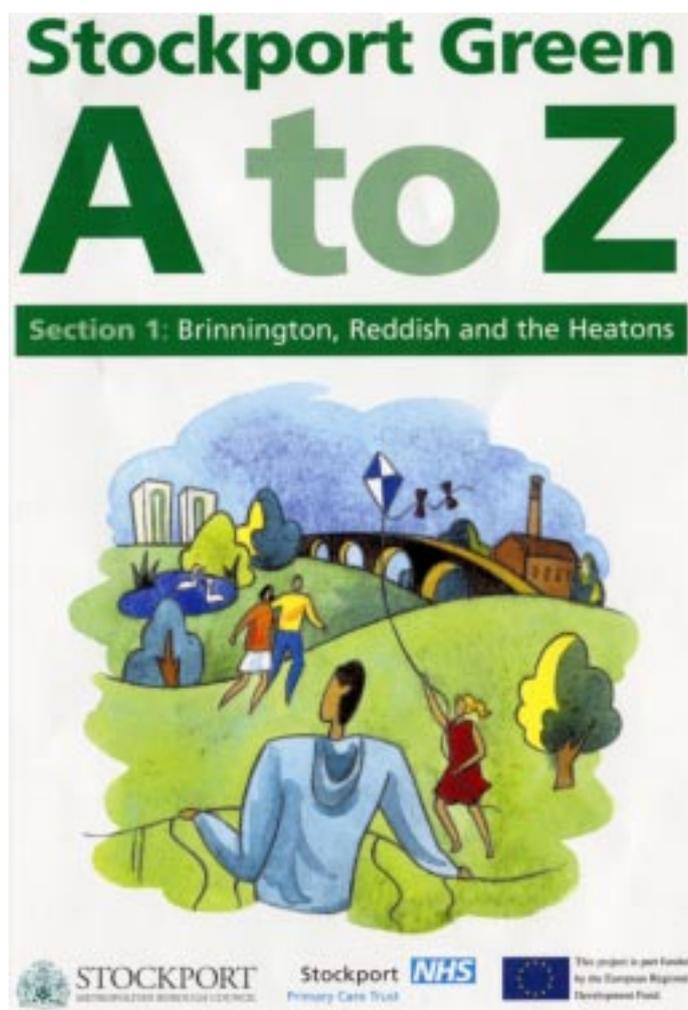
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For the last century the A-Z street atlas has mapped the urban fabric that surrounds the lives of most people in the UK. Most of these urban street finders emphasize the road network, and by implication celebrate the rise in individual mobility brought about by the private use of the motor car. Green space or leisure pursuits are marginalized by the need to index every street name. All cities look the same, with diversity reduced to a single functional cartographic style, recognised and sold as part of significant national ranges of commercially successful products. Colour designs emphasise the primacy of the road network, rather than individual buildings. Roads stand out from the surrounding land use. Only limited attempts are made to map out local facilities or to represent the values of people who happen to live on the map. These products are simply designed to help the motorist find a named street.

However increasing congestion on roads and concern for quality of life have led to more local and less commercial initiatives that offer alternative urban views. Local Agenda 21 and the rhetoric of sustainable development have also encouraged green, bottom-up mapping, incorporating the views of local people. A true green A-Z might serve a radical function, acting as an agent for change. It might index diverse ecological information, pollution sources, pedestrian and alternative transport initiatives, cycling facilities, whole-food or organic food shops cafés or cooperatives, recycling sites and outdoor leisure facilities. It might chart the negative as well as map the positive.

Phase One of the Stockport Green A to Z covering Brinnington, Reddish and the Heatons claims to be such a map. Stockport MBC and the Stockport Primary Care Trust have released this map, as the first of a projected series, 'with the help of the communities in Brinnington, Reddish and the Heatons'. It maps the area in a colourful and informal style, printed 'using vegetable-based inks on paper from sustainably managed forests' on a double-sided folded sheet with integral title panel. When folded the

message of the map leaps out from the front cover and verso. On the front is an artistic view of the area, depicted as open green space being enjoyed by walkers and a kite flier, but with iconic local buildings, both old and new in the background. On the verso the message is literally spelt out: why not walk- 'it's healthy', and 'it's cleaner and relaxing'. The words are backed up by a second drawing of people enjoying healthy leisure away from the crowded road in the background. To emphasize the point a link is made to an interactive web-based air quality site. No attempt is made to be specific and map out the polluters in this area; instead a positive view of Stockport is preserved.

The design of the map itself reinforces the central message that walking is better than driving, that leisure and lifestyle matter and that green or quiet streets and open spaces need to be mapped out. It is not a conventional cartographic product. This map is an artistic image with quirky figures, iconic representations of buildings, pastel shades and uppercase lettering in an informal font. Together these features give the impression of an informal, subjective, and almost hand-drawn product, rather than a scientific or functional map.

Key

-  café
-  pub
-  golf course
-  bowling green
-  tennis court
-  good view
-  cricket pitch
-  hill
-  shops
-  school
-  bus stop on busier routes
-  access to green space

streets

-  pleasant and green
-  pleasant and quiet
-  less busy (with greening)
-  less busy (not greened)

-  other (with greening)
-  other (not greened)
-  not recorded as a public highway
-  motorway

paths in built space

-  straight, lit, wide and greened
-  straight and lit
-  adequately cleaned but may be neither lit nor straight
-  not recorded as a public highway
-  other
-  pleasant path (as described by people using it)

paths in green space

-  dry, level and clean
-  does not meet all three of above criteria
-  not recorded as a public highway
-  cycle paths

-  selected slopes – more strenuous shown by greater number of hearts
-  residential area
-  greenspace
-  allotments
-  industrial area
-  number of steps
-  dog waste bin
-  chemist / health centre
-  park containing wheelchair accessible paths
-  playing fields
-  pedestrian crossing


You will walk this far in 10 minutes if you are a fast walker


You will walk this far in 10 minutes if you are a slow walker

Point and area symbols map local outdoor leisure facilities, but largely ignore indoor leisure pursuits. The view, the terrain, the outdoor sports facilities, the allotment gardens, the parks, the schools and the green spaces stand out and are often named. Residential areas and industrial areas are also colour coded but are less prominent in the design and are not named.

Line symbols emphasize paths and streets, but subvert accepted classifications. Instead of the taken-for-granted view that roads are classified according to width or their suitability for car travel, this map indicates streets according to how quiet they are and how green they are. Only the favoured green or quiet streets are named. The motorway and the busy roads are depicted in grey and brown tones, with green and pink used to show green and quiet streets. Only selected green and quiet streets are indexed. Paths receive even more attention in the key. Thirteen different symbols are used, with distinctions drawn between paths in built or green space, and according to such factors as whether the path is lit, clean, pleasant, dry, level, for cycles, or whether it is stepped or sloping. Interesting and novel features of the design include precise counts of numbers of steps and the use of a scale bar relating mapped distance to walking time rather than conventional distance.

So what is wrong with this clean, happy piece of persuasion? The most important problem is that there are inconsistencies in the design that make functional day to day use of the map at best problematic and at worst misleading. The access to green space symbol is used in a very strange way. Examine for example the block of open land along the Tame Valley between Reddish Vale and Tiviot Way. Many footpaths are indicated as leading into and across this significant green space, but very few of these are shown as offering access. So what does the symbol mean? Why bother to use it at all if it is not used with any consistency? The pleasant path symbol (as described by people using it) is also a very strange device. I searched for these pleasant paths and found only four on the whole map. The message of the map is that walking is fun and pleasant, there are certainly other paths that are pleasant, (I have walked some of them), so why bother to show just these four? Two are very hard to read anyway because the sun symbol bleeds in to the urban backdrop.

More significant than either of these problems are issues of classification. We do not know what makes a road green. Or what makes a road quiet. Presumably some green roads are not quiet, and perhaps all quiet roads are not

green? But who knows? Paths in built space are a real problem. Again there is no definition of what 'greened' means. Some paths are straight, lit, wide and greened. The pink path is straight and lit, but presumably not wide or greened. But is it cleaned? The dotted yellow path tells us it is cleaned but isn't lit or straight. But is it greened? And what on earth is the other category? Perhaps it is lit but curved and narrow? Or more likely the designer simply doesn't know! Multiple attribute classification leads to confusion rather than clarity. The map urges the reader to contact the Transportation and Health Department in the local authority for details of the grading system, why not make it clearer on the map itself?

Another major functional problem with the map is that the artists have been allowed to take over from the designers. Redundant icons abound. An ornate compass rose, common animals and birds such as a heron, fox, squirrel, pheasant, rabbit and dog are placed where there is room on the map. Golf course pins abound all over the three major courses shown in the area. They appear as red and yellow flags across Reddish Vale Heaton Moor and Houldsworth golf courses, but are randomly placed signifying nothing other than a desire to make the map appear busier. In addition there is an iconic symbol for each golf course, Reddish Vale enjoys three, even though it is a single course. Yet despite this rich iconic support you can't tell what really matters: the location of the club house, how to get in to the course, and what the course is like are a complete mystery! Another redundant and confusing icon maps steep slopes: everyone I have spoken to felt this symbol might signify romance rather than exertion! Also it makes little sense to use it in association with a steps symbol as often happens on the map.

Most icons on the map are however, significant buildings. Churches are particularly popular for this iconic treatment. In congested areas these are mapped in circles some way away from their actual position. Very confusing. The quality of the drawings also varies greatly. The pyramid and the railway viaduct are probably the two most obvious symbols of Stockport but are depicted in such a way that you would hardly recognise them. None of these icons is named or indexed. Also the scale of the drawings is inconsistent. The net impact of all these icons to create a busy image, where the iconic detail supports the basic message of the map, but where the icons fail to make the map very usable.

A final and critical point lies with potential uses of the map. Too few facilities are indexed to make the map very useful. Yes it might be of value to people wanting to

find a quiet road to live on, or to an aged walker wishing to plan a flat ramble. But there is more to green urban futures than the remit of the local authority transportation department. You can't use the map to plan a bus journey. You can't find the address of a recycling point. You don't know whether the faceless industrial areas are harmless packaging plants or pernicious chemical factories. You don't know where the most bio-diverse areas are. You can't tell how many football pitches are on a site. Sadly despite its attractive informal design this map fails to provide enough precise green information.

Any initiative to map out alternative views of the urban landscape should be welcomed and this map clearly signals that there is more to Stockport than industry, roads, houses and shops. A green map compatible with LA 21 ought to incorporate views of local communities, map out local views and chart alternative meanings of space. If it were systematic in its depiction, broad in its coverage and properly designed then it might serve a useful political function and challenge orthodox values. Sadly this map is too vague in its execution and too partial in its content to live up to this aim. Nor is it really a Green A to Z: too little is indexed, and too few issues of green relevance are addressed.