Prince Charles Was Here

Fed up with the work of contemporary architects in the 1980s, the Prince of Wales put his back garden where his mouth was. But is Poundbury any good?

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The people of Poundbury are happy souls but occasionally they have complaints. Someone has parked a commercial vehicle in the streets, which is not permitted, so there'll probably be a minute about that at the Residents' Association meeting. Someone else had an idea about repainting the colour of their front door but then a neighbour mentioned a clause in the housing contract and the door stayed brown.

And someone called Sue McCarthy-Moore is still talking about the gravel. 'I have two teenage daughters who are always treading it into the house,' she complains. The gravel is the colour of camels, a cheaper alternative to cobbles and more attractive than tarmac. It is almost everywhere in Poundbury and has the attraction of making everyone audible as they walk around, which means no burglars creeping around unannounced after dark. The residents are very proud that there is no crime in their neighbourhood, beyond someone once having sinful thoughts as they left a fitness class in the market hall.

It is probably a mistake to think of Poundbury as a village or a small town. It is, in fact, a vision - the peculiar fancy of the Prince of Wales. Disillusioned with the ugly urban sprawl of the 1980s, Prince Charles announced that callous modern architects had done more damage to the country than the Luftwaffe. Accordingly, he decided he would have a go himself, and drew up a plan for a community that would combine beautiful dwellings with nearby workplaces and shops; a place where council tenants would mingle with the more prosperous, a place where traditional values would be upheld and kids would play hopscotch in the spotless streets.

It would also be a place where cynics just up on the train from London would have a field day. There would be no television aerials (ugly), no front gardens (divisive), no front-of-house parking (obstructive), nothing at all unsightly or untidy. The place has been open for sneering ever since planning consent was granted in 1989, and work began on the outskirts of Dorchester in Dorset. The land is part of the Duchy of Cornwall, which consists of 126,000 acres in 22 counties, with the primary function of providing an income for the Prince. Poundbury, or New Poundbury as it is known by locals (there is already an older Poundbury nearby – full of the stuff Charles dislikes), will eventually cover 400 acres, although it currently only occupies one tenth of this. 'Now that it's a few years old, it's working well,' Sue McCarthy-Moore says in her interior design workshop, 'although there was initially a feeling that it was going to be a Utopia.'

It is still a novel place, and the novel it most resembles is something by Thomas Hardy. The Prince's dream has been realised by a town planner from

Luxembourg called Leon Krier, and the Prince has personally overseen the construction of a settlement that has been made to look old even with the cement still wet. There are many beautiful buildings but no set style; the stonework and designs have been lifted from many of the most picturesque dwellings in Dorset's other villages and plonked together to form something that is, presumably, even more picturesque. People in Poundbury don't like it when you suggest that their new home looks like a film-set from The Mayor of Casterbridge; it's not always this quiet, they say, not when the football-mad kids get home from school (not that they're allowed to kick a ball against anyone's front wall, of course).

About 500 people live here and there are plenty of things for them to do beyond getting gravel out of their shoes. The health centre offers many alternative therapies, including one called manual lymph drainage, and the new market hall offers regular wine-tasting evenings, though unfortunately you've missed 'Germany: What Happened?'

Simon Conibear, the Duchy's representative in Poundbury, takes me on a little walking tour. 'This is the street we took the Queen up – and John Prescott,' he says. ('It was a bit like a mother inspecting her son's school project,' one resident told me later.)

We approach the House of Dorchester chocolate factory. 'If you go around the back,' Conibear says, 'you can get what I call droppings for £1.20 a bag.' We pass the enterprise centre, which contains small computer companies. The short streets have inbuilt traffic-calming blind corners ensuring cars can't go faster than 20 miles an hour.

I ask Conibear about the Poundbury rules. 'Oh yes,' he says. 'We run it as a sort of draconian conservation area and people like that. They know that the area is not going to be disfigured.' The houses we pass cost from about £150,000 to £350,000. The place names – Evershot Walk, Longmore Street, Pummery Square – are named after Duchy estate properties, such as farms. The Prince is always consulted. There is one glaring exception: the Brownsword Hall, the main focal point, is named after Andrew Brownsword, the man from Hallmark cards who stumped up the money for it.

A few crunchy footsteps from the hall and you come to the Octagon café, purveyors of fine coffee and panini. It opened last July, which is just as well because there's nowhere else to eat. Clay and Mary have sunk their life savings into the place and they are proud of the comments in their visitors' book. 'Really nice cakes,' one entry says, 'and comfy settees!'

At one table near the door, Lilian Hart and Rosemary Warren, both retired, often meet over a glass of juice to talk about Poundbury's progress. Mrs Warren and her husband were the first people to own a house here, while Mrs Hart and her husband were the second, moving in during January 1995. They adore it, not least the location. 'I can drive to the supermarket and be parked and shopping within four minutes, five at the most,' says Mrs Hart. 'I can be at a hospital in two-and-a-half minutes and within 30 seconds I'm in the country. I wanted a new house. At my age I don't want to be doing any maintenance – and it's beautifully insulated.' She likes the fact that her neighbours come from all over Britain. There are a lot of retired service personnel who once worked at the nearby naval bases. Both women wish there was an easier route to the airport because, like a lot of Poundbury folk, they usually fly away somewhere warm for the winter. And they'd like a little grocery store and a post office.

'But I have only one severe criticism,' Mrs Hart says. 'We have a playground across from us and it's not big enough. And it's in the wrong place.' Mrs Hart mentioned this to the Duchy people and she says there are now 'rumours' that it will move. 'Prince Charles does take an interest in our views,' says Mrs Warren. 'When my husband died, he sent me a note.'

I tell these ladies that I am soon to visit their fellow resident Peter Bryant and they are delighted. 'Peter is fantastic, although not the most charming person in the world,' they agree. 'Until recently he was the chairman of the Residents' Association. 'He'll always speak his mind.' True, as it turned out.

Peter Bryant and his wife Diane came across Poundbury by chance in the early days, when they were looking for property elsewhere in the region. They'd had enough of Thames Ditton, and didn't like the idea of living in a big city. 'The last time I went to London I was disgusted,' he says. 'It was a town full of foreigners. It's hard to hear the English language spoken on the streets.'

These days he finds that Poundbury is something of a visitor attraction itself. 'The local tourist authority reckons that 300,000 came last year,' he confirms. 'Some people didn't like it, but they probably didn't like it before they came.' I look at him in puzzlement. 'A personal dislike of the sponsor,' he explains.

The Bryants have been in Poundbury for five years. So, what do they feel have been the major changes in that time? To answer the question, Peter Bryant reads from a letter he received from a friend that morning, which claimed that Poundbury had gone 'from media abuse to worldwide acclaim'. Certainly, the concept of Poundbury has attracted great interest from architects and planners in Boston and Japan, and its guiding principles have been adapted by other new developments in Dorset, Essex and Edinburgh. Indeed, a government report issued in May 2000 actually praised its design and community spirit.

But the media criticism has not entirely disappeared. In a letter to the Observer last year, the architect Richard Rogers referred to Poundbury as 'a questionable exercise in Hardyesque nostalgia'. Jonathan Glancey, influential architect critic of the Guardian, believes 'it doesn't really work on any level'. Glancey suggests that everything is a little bit too perfect. 'It's overwrought. You have to be gentle and loose with new buildings but there's been far too much effort put into it. The streets feel too wide because, unlike the old villages which inspired it, any new place is built with strict regulations that must allow those huge fire-engines through.'

Clearly, it is easier to build model houses than a model community, no matter how many stringent rules you apply. 'Prince Charles's vision would incorporate men on every corner turning the leg of a chair on a lathe,' Glancey says. 'But the reality is that people are upstairs in their bedroom furtively downloading who-knows-what from the Internet.'

'It's not perfect,' says Andrew Hamilton, Poundbury's Development Director. 'Initially there was a feeling that this was going to be a nirvana and I spent the first few years trying to lower expectations. But a lot of the scepticism has gone and we have done some quite radical things, such as reducing the dependency on the motor car and integrating social and private housing.'

Hamilton is based in London and he has metropolitan phrases to describe Poundbury's chief attributes. Its 'high-density sustainable community' is 'rehumanising the domestic environment', for example.

Despite the fact that Poundbury has been habitable for six years, it is still too early to judge. The perimeter of the present development resounds to the buzz of bulldozers and drills, as new small factories and strips of housing rise from the surrounding countryside.

Residents say they've got used to living on a building site and hope that, as more people move in, they will bring with them new shops and a better transport system. Many people are excited that the Poundbury pub, the social heart of any traditional community, is nearly complete, although it still lacks a name. I ask Simon Conibear about this.

'Nothing's been confirmed,' he says, 'but it may be called something quite obvious.'

The Prince of Wales? The Three Feathers?

'Could be.'

What about the Queen and Intruder? Or The Gravel and Dyson? Probably not.