

KEITH Walker eyes me from the other side of the roaring log fire and tells me: “It won’t happen unless you get off your backside and work on it – really work on it.”

This is his advice — imparted in The Allenheads Inn — to any rural community seeking an alternative to the kind of bleak future facing Allenheads in the mid-

about it,” says Trevor Went, the trust’s secretary and the third of us enjoying the welcome heat of the inn’s fire.

What they did was to form an action group (now the trust) and their first task was to start tidying up the village. “There were about 30 of us at that time and we started clearing up some of the rubble from the build-

ings that were falling down,” recalls Keith.

The group raised funds in grants from various bodies, and from local philanthropist

and businessman Morris Muter, which allowed it to convert an old bus garage and stables into a heritage centre, a café and a cottage. It also provided a home to display the 200-year-old Armstrong hydraulic engine which had been used to power mine machinery. It then went on to build a children’s play area,

THE VILLAGE THAT CAME BACK FROM THE BRINK

1980s. And he should know: he is the chairman of the Allenheads Trust which has helped transform the prospects of this Pennines fell village.

The settlement had grown up around lead mining, an industry which had its heyday in the mid-19th century and which had been given a reprieve by British Steel reopening the mines for fluorspar to be used in the Consett steelworks. But with the end of Consett’s steel industry in 1980 came the end of Allenheads mining, and with it the village’s major employer.

This was a body blow. Allenheads is no leafy stockbroker-belt dormitory: while it nestles in a picturesque valley, it is still high in the fells – beautiful, imposing country, but hard. Such communities throughout the North were struggling and there was no reason to believe Allenheads would be any different. Soon its three shops were reduced to one sweetshop-cum-post office, buildings in the village fell into dereliction and a national newspaper used it as a case study to illustrate a feature on dying villages in the Pennines.

Twenty years ago Allenheads was written off as a dying village, but its people were not about to let that happen. PETER JACKSON discovers how a community fought back – and won.

“People got upset about that and said: ‘Do we really want to be known as a dying village?’ That was a catalyst and that’s when people decided to do something



Keith Walker in the old blacksmith's shop.

Pictures: Stewart Bonney

lay a nature trail and recreate an old blacksmith’s shop.

Rent from the cottage and the lease from the café provide the trust with an income stream with which to lease the land and buildings for these assets and to pay for repairs and upkeep. Future plans include an upgrade to the café and an extension of its services to provide the village with a basic shop again. Also, the trust has obtained a grant of £5,000 to commission an architect to survey an old lime kiln on the outskirts of the village, with a view to having it repaired and made into a tourist attraction.

“We want any passing visitor to say: ‘My, that looks smart’ rather than ‘What a mess’, particularly as it’s on



Christine Hutchinson's home baked cakes are a treat at the Hemmel Café.

the approach to the village and would provide someone's first impression," explains Keith.

The Allenheads Trust received help from the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty to pay an artist to produce a new exhibition board for the blacksmith's shop, and for a craftsman to rebuild a model of the village as it was in 19th century, above that shop.

All this takes hard work. Keith reckons that in the past two weeks he has put in 15 hours work for the trust – more than usual, admittedly, but indicative of the commitment. Trevor estimates he puts in about five hours a week.

The trust has eight members on its board, whose ages range from the early 40s to mid-60s, and their occupations span a wide spread of talent and experience. Before retirement, Keith ran a community centre in Boldon and Trevor was the chief executive of Newcastle Airport. The other members comprise a farmer, dentist, artist, geologist, teacher and – more unusually – a butler.

But they can also count on the help of the rest of the village. "There's a sig-

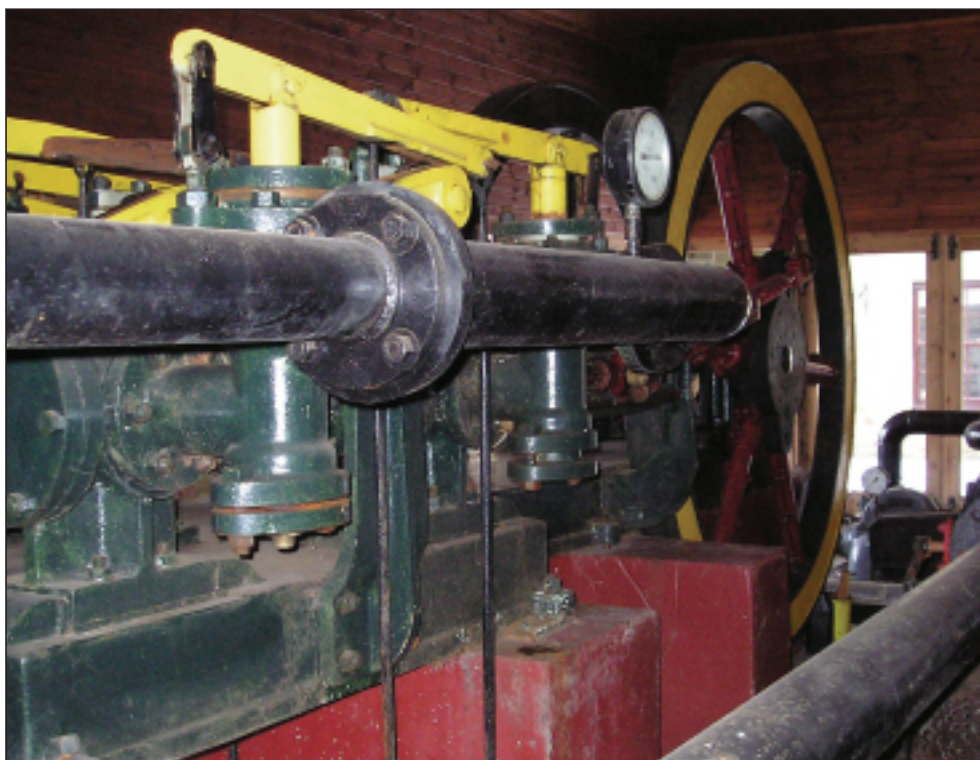
nificant number of people who are unwilling or unable to become directors but who, if called upon, will turn out at the drop of a hat and give a hand with numerous jobs that have to be done, from clearing gutters to sweeping up leaves and repairing the odd fence," says Trevor.

"There's always stuff like that to do. There's a core of people in the village you can make a phone call to and ask to come and hold a ladder and they'll be there. We would have real difficulty if we didn't have that kind of backing."

All this work and dedication has paid dividends. Allenheads is no longer in decline, but is flourishing. Its population has stabilised at about 200 and

there is a good age mix, with retired people but also a healthy number of young families with children. Buildings are being bought, refurbished and made a part of a thriving, growing community.

"Allenheads has a much better feel to it now," says Trevor. "The village is a healthier place now with houses being improved and renovated, and there are more people prepared to commit to making a life here than was the case a few years ago. Our thriving annual



Inside the engine house.

village show, run entirely by volunteers, is a good indicator of a strong community spirit.

“There’s a huge amount of property improvement and it’s great to see buildings that were little more than ruins a few years ago being turned into lovely new homes. A few years ago the stone was being sold off from these ruins, but that has stopped and these places are being revived as new housing for a living village.

“The population has a reasonable cross section with — yes — a number of elderly retired people, but they’re not in the majority and there’s a lot of youngish families with children, which gives us hope



The Heritage Centre occupies a 17th century building restored by the Allenheads Trust.



small rural community like this, the most ambitious schemes are the ones that receive the least support from the community. Keep it small and, if possible, go for projects that will provide some revenue.”

A light dusting of snow in England’s highest village.

As a result of this strategy, and of all the projects and great community spirit, their village has not died. On the contrary, it is a thriving community which looks forward to the future rather than fearing it. ●

for the future. Some of our hill farmers are quite young and there are families who commute to work down the valley to Hexham, Prudhoe or even Newcastle. They include a spread of professions from teachers, solicitors, a dentist and doctors.”

The story of Allenheads should be an inspiration for other rural communities facing challenges, proving that — given the will and determination — decline is not inevitable. “My advice to anyone looking to do what we have done is: don’t go too far, don’t go too big, just do what you can manage,” says Keith.

Trevor agrees, adding: “In a



Customers at the Allenheads Inn on a summer’s day.