Miracle of the Moor

One of the most isolated villages in the Pennines has been dubbed the broadband capital of Britain. Sean Dodson on how a drive for digital led to rural regeneration

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Monday evening, Alston Moor, the north Pennines. In the gloaming of the setting sun, a broken turbine is whirring in the wind. Daniel Heery, a wiry, quietly spoken, Wirral-born project manager, is out on the moor to examine the machine. It powers the antenna connecting the tiny Cumbrian town of Alston with the neighbouring village of Garrigill and, with it down, the connection is lost and the village is denied vital access to the internet. Heery is keen to get it fixed.

Alston Moor used to be one of the remotest corners of England. In winter, just a single bus a day will take you off the moor, and the train station closed in 1974. There is no supermarket and the nearest local paper is published 20 miles away. Isolation can have its plus points, mind. When foot and mouth and BSE ravaged the English countryside, Alston was so isolated that not a single case of either was reported on the moor.

But today, Alston is a leading light in the community broadband movement. The tiny town (population 2,200) has been dubbed the broadband capital of Britain and one of the most wired places in the country. According to data published by Leeds University, Alston came second after Kensington and Chelsea with the highest rate of broadband take-up in the UK. Moreover, Alston enjoys a PC ownership rate of 88%, even higher than the internet hotspots of Sweden, Silicon Valley or South Korea.

Last week, BT announced that it is to wire the vast majority of rural exchanges by 2005. Soon, the kind of network connectivity enjoyed in Alston could be repeated across rural Britain. So what, then, does the wired countryside look like?

Back up on the moor, Heery is joined by Paul Crabtree, the local copper, who patrols the moors in his Nissan Terrano. The highest point in the Pennines is only a few miles from Alston and it can snow on the moor as late as April. PC Crabtree keeps the town informed by SMS, using the network to send out text message alerts when the roads are impassable.

Then there is Ray Cummins, the local Methodist preacher. Later this year, his church will lose the last of its four chapels on the moor and superintendent

Cummins will be reduced to renting rooms for worship. The internet helps him keep his flock together: 'it becomes a daily point of contact,' he says.

Not to be outdone, the parish council is about to begin streaming its meetings on the internet, jokingly titled I'm a Parish Councillor, Get Me Out of Here. In a nearby village, Dave Liquorice, a sound engineer, runs an amateur meteorology centre to report on weather conditions. Others use the network to share lifts to Penrith or Newcastle or to book the community minibus.

Heery came to this remote corner of Cumbria in June 1997 to help promote IT training centres in schools. He soon began to see IT and the development of the internet as a key to unlocking the town's isolation. He helped establish a pioneering scheme that would give every household in the town its own free PC. Heery then helped form a co-operative to furnish the town with a high-speed, wireless internet network. The concept of Cybermoor was born.

'We wanted some sort of democratic structure,' says Heery over lunch in the Angel pub in the centre of Alston, 'where people could have the chance to participate in managing the company and have their say. There was a dilemma that we had spent all this public money on a broadband network, but it didn't feel right to give it to a private sector company that could potentially profit from it without passing the profits back to the community. A co-operative model allows us to mutualise the public investment that has gone into Cybermoor.'

Initially, the recipients of free computers made do with a dial-up connection but, within a year, the Cybermoor project had established the wireless network offering broadband speeds. Nearly 32% of the community have now signed up for broadband, paying the co-operative £15 per month (£5 for those on benefits) and, two years later, Cybermoor enjoys the second-highest rating for PC ownership in the UK, just behind a similar scheme in Suffolk.

The cost of buying computers for practically every house in Alston and keeping the network running for three years is £1.9m, or roughly £860 per person, although the wireless network cost just £450,000, or £104 per person. The bulk of the money came from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) with additional funds from the Department for Trade and Industry and regional development agencies.

In February, the co-operative published Cybermoor: Measuring the Benefits. It found that the project brought in an additional £300,000 to the local community every year. It also reported that 77% of the town had improved its IT skills and that 81% of single-parent families had broadband at home. The network has brought other, unexpected, benefits. The local estate agent thinks house prices have increased by 25% since the launch of Cybermoor.

Last week, BT announced it was about to convert the bulk of the remaining local exchanges left out of the broadband revolution. BT says this will enable 99.5% of local exchanges by 2005, although this still means that roughly 100,000 households will be excluded.

Moreover, a forthcoming report by the organisation for economic co-operation and development (OECD), states that the BT scheme will give the UK the highest broadband availability rates of any G7 country. The report, to be published next month, shows that no other G7 country is close to the UK's figures – the US is aiming for 2007, while France wants 95% by the end of 2005.

BT says there is still an important role for community networks such as Cybermoor. 'It will come down to customer choice,' says a spokesman. 'Many [of the community networks] only set up because no commercial company – and it is not just BT – could see a viable business case. We now think there is one as the market has moved on dramatically, thanks to the work of companies such as BT and thousands of campaigners. We would certainly be interested to hear from any of them if their services might complement our own.'

Community networks are not just confined to rural outposts such as Alston. Deptford, in south London, is about as far from the north Pennines as you can get and still be in England. The plan is to enable local council officers in Lewisham to be able to work from home or while mobile in the community. Enabling such a wireless network also hits a number of community and small business objectives, so what might suit the local council can be shared with the wider community. The roll out is expected to begin later this month, with the whole of Deptford covered by October.

'The strength of community enterprise is that it really does engage people in local communities,' explains Malcolm Corbett, manager of Community Broadband Network (CBN). 'The process of aggregation has been very successful before, not least in the case of American telephone services in the 1920s where, in rural areas, people aggregated the demand in order to get telephone services provided. It proved highly successful, and community enterprises for broadband have the same potential.'

Corbett helped found the Community Broadband Network in February last year. The scheme had the backing of Stephen Timms, the e-commerce minister, and a number of rural charities. In a little over a year, CBN has grown to include 215 community groups connected to the site's intranet. Approximately 75 have launched their own broadband networks.

Corbett sees the community broadband movement as beginning to move beyond simply campaigning for access. Now, the campaigners are beginning to organise in a way that can provide economic benefits out of the service itself. In Alston they are developing Voice over IP (VoIP) to provide the town with free telephone calls.

In Deptford, the emphasis is not just on providing a network for council workers, but also providing a high bandwidth wireless service that can be used for a range of multimedia applications, which in turn can be used for regeneration. All the artists being priced out of Shoreditch have to be able to set up studio somewhere.

'This stuff is moving very fast,' says Corbett. 'I think there is a great opportunity for communities to get involved and end up with a situation where you get not just high levels of take-up of broadband, but much more interesting uses and a completely different way in which people talk about it.'

Others seem to be moving the debate on, too. Next month, the Access to Broadband Campaign will host a conference devoted to content and services. The focus will be less on access and more on what to do now that many community networks are up and running.

'We've used public intervention to improve local conditions,' says Heery back in the pub. 'No one's going to build a dual carriageway into the middle of Alston Moor, but we've built a digital dual carriageway here and it can have the same effect.'