

# How villagers fought off a monster Amazon warehouse

The world's biggest retailer wanted to build a huge development in Yorkshire. A small band of locals had other ideas

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Members of the local community group Save Our Spen, who successfully campaigned to prevent Amazon building a huge warehouse on greenbelt land near Cleckheaton, Yorkshire

SUNDAY TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER JAMES GLOSSOP

Britain is mired in economic gloom. The price of food is soaring. Industrial action is causing chaos amid fears that machines will take workers' jobs. The country is at odds with itself.

But in one corner of West Yorkshire, a resistance is rising. The flinty locals of the Spen Valley have banded together to say no to the cold demands of economic growth at any cost; no to outsiders telling them how to live their lives; no to progress on other people's terms.

This of course is the story of the Luddite rebellion of 1811, which which culminated in the croppers of Cleckheaton marching on Rawfolds Mill to attack a hated symbol of industrial progress. Seventeen rebels were hanged for their troubles.



But fast forward two centuries and a remarkably similar battle is playing out in the very same corner of west Yorkshire. In 2021, Amazon announced an application to build a vast fulfilment centre on several fields in the neighbouring village of Scholes.

The planned site was a behemoth, due to cover a green field area the size of 37 football pitches, with 855 car parking spaces and 82 loading docks. Delivery trucks would be in and out 24 hours a day, 364 days a year, slipping right onto the M62 motorway and spreading out across the north. Amazon spent a fortune putting a detailed application together, promising to bring 1,500 jobs with them. It all seemed inevitable. Jeff Bezos, one of the world's richest men, was coming to town.

Not anymore. This month, a group of local volunteers in Scholes won a surprise victory against the world's largest retailer. By the barest of margins, 4-3, Amazon's proposal was rejected by Kirklees council's strategic planning committee. David had slain Goliath, wielding little more than a stack of flyers and a crowdfunding campaign.

This month I went to meet these latter day Luddites at their headquarters, Dar Shivtiel's house in Scholes, where they have gathered most Wednesday nights for 21 months to wage their guerrilla campaign.

They make an unlikely group. Shivtiel, 55, effusive and energetic, owns an electrical engineering company. He is the technical guru, a man who will happily digest a 100 page report on light pollution before bed. Sharon Lewis, 53, has spent 25 years working in warehousing and logistics. She is the slightly terrifying Yorkshirewoman who chairs the group. You really wouldn't ask anyone else to do it. Two quieter members of the group are Matthew Beardsworth, 45, who owns a nearby garden centre and put his marketing skills to good use on the campaign, and Ian Abbott, 60, a retired police sergeant who is a dab hand with a freedom of information request. Together they are Save Our Spen; think Local Hero meets Richard Osman's Thursday Murder Club.



What this group has in common is a very large field and a burning sense of injustice. All of them live next to or near the site of Amazon's planned fulfilment centre. Shvitiel's house, which abuts the roaring M62, backs onto the field in question.

This used to be green belt land, but in 2019 was designated for employment purposes. None of the group object to it being developed. But they say the original plan was supposed to bring skilled jobs in manufacturing and light engineering. But the development was only supposed to cover 10.6 hectares of the 26 hectare site.

So when the Amazon plan dropped on their doorstep two years ago, seeking to use almost the entire site and offering primarily warehousing jobs, they were appalled. "Our world fell apart really," recalled Lewis. "I felt sick to my stomach. It was too big, too damaging, just the wrong building in the wrong place." Their concerns took in the sheer size of the building, light pollution, noise pollution, air pollution, the effect on biodiversity and a huge spike in traffic - the area is already congested and devotees of Radio 2's traffic bulletins know junction 26 of the M62 as a familiar foe.

They were also worried about the type of jobs on offer. Amazon recently announced it was shutting a warehouse in nearby Doncaster as it cuts 1,200 jobs in the UK. "My four year old granddaughter goes to nursery in this town," said Abbott. "I want her to be skilled. I do not want her in an Amazon factory, stacking shelves for £11 an hour, in a job that will probably be done by robots at some point anyway." They all wanted to fight the plan, the question was how. "We didn't know how we were going to take this on," said Lewis.

"This is a beast and we are a little village community."

Undaunted, the core group rapidly coalesced and got to work. They delved deep into Amazon's proposals. They held local meetings in church halls. They produced leaflets. They started a crowdfunding campaign that has brought in £17,500 so far. Then they put this money to work, hiring a planning expert, a traffic expert and a landscape architect to produce reports to rival Amazon's.

"People suggested we climb trees or glue ourselves to the A58," said Abbott. "That was never our agenda. We attacked this on process and planning policy. We had to take the emotion out of it."

The Save our Spen group also found that much of the Amazon proposal seemed cut and pasted from other projects. Lewis didn't recognise a B road mentioned in one document and googled it, only to find the road is actually in Bournemouth.

Only five were in favour. This helped buoy the group through their long twilight struggle. "The most amazing thing is that we've never fallen out once" said Beardsworth. "You do hear of community groups going horribly wrong."

In the days leading up to the decisive meeting on March 15, Save Our Spen bombarded the seven relevant council members with material. Yet as the group arrived in Huddersfield for the decision, they weren't hopeful. Two bouncers had been placed on the door, in case someone tried a dirty protest. "We were very pessimistic," said Shvitiel. "We felt that the council had been on the side of the applicant the whole way through."

But an emotional hearing appeared to win key councillors over. The result came down. Pints and a celebratory dinner followed. "I sat there in disbelief," recalled Abbott. "My wife had three G&Ts. It's the happiest I've seen her in years." A victory for the little guy then. But is it a short-sighted one? The Luddite movement was futile and found itself on the wrong side of history. Are the new nimbys of Save Our Spen making the same mistake?

Martin Hathaway, managing director of the Mid Yorkshire Chamber of Commerce, believes they are missing the bigger picture. "The Amazon jobs are wrongly seen as low level," he said. "But there's a lot more to it. This is a big construction. This sort of chat does not go down well with the Spennites. None of them have shopped on Amazon since this campaign began, though Shvitiel still uses his Alexa "because that's a loss-making part of the business". They are considering writing a book, he jokes - How to Beat Jeff Bezos - and then selling it on Amazon.

This war is not quite over. Amazon is "considering its options" and could theoretically appeal the decision or submit a revised application. But in the meantime, they can relax for a bit.

Lewis' family were thrilled by the result, with her kids asking her if they've finally got their mum back. Beardsworth's wife was less delighted. "She's cursing the result," he said. "Because she's been using her free Wednesday nights to watch BBC1's Interior Design Masters with Alan Carr."

What really struck me about this victory is how unusual it is to see a community group, outmatched and outspent, prevail against a politically savvy corporate colossus. Travelling around Britain today, one often encounters a pervasive sense of powerlessness. People often tell me they feel the future is something that is being done to them by politicians, tech giants and unknown planning gurus; their towns and cities reimagined according to grand plans that pay scant attention to their actual lives.

Committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has," wrote the anthropologist Margaret Mead. In the Spen Valley, those committed citizens are demanding progress on their terms. And for now at least, they have won.