

BRIDGE

Issue 05

A PD Ports Publication

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Collaboration for Change

Culture Club
Michelle Robson

Taking flight
RSPB Saltholme

Local Hero
Mark Benton

What's inside

04 **Welcome**

Foreword from editor Kirsten Donkin introducing the latest edition of Bridge, with a focus on the power of collaboration and partnership working to help Teesside achieve its aims.

06 **Getting to know you**

Joining PD Ports as chief people and compliance officer, Michelle Robson has spent her career in shipbuilding and the offshore oil and gas sectors. She explains more about her role, the importance of culture in a business and the power of collaboration.



10 **Why connectivity matters**

Promoting strategic ambitions and priorities for northern England, Transport for the North represents more than 16 million people and 1.1 million businesses. The organisation's principal policy and strategy officer Donna Newsome explains why improving the movement of goods around the region is key to success.

16 **Banging the drum for UK maritime**

The UK's maritime industry is one of the nation's largest, encompassing a wide variety of businesses, organisations and stakeholders. Acting as a single voice for the industry, Maritime UK is leading efforts to encourage collaboration across the sector. Chief executive Chris Shirling-Rooke explains more.

22 **Welcome to Teesside**

To celebrate the arrival of the Emerald Duchess on Teesside this summer, hundreds of business leaders, maritime experts and representatives of organisations linked to the river were invited to witness her formal naming – or christening – ceremony. PD Ports chief executive officer Frans Calje explains more about the special event.

26 **The problem with skills**

Zoe Lewis is a key voice on the issues of skills for young people in Teesside. As principal/chief executive of Middlesbrough College she oversees some 11,000 students and apprentices each year. Writing for Bridge, she explains more about the problems facing the sector, in her own style.

30 **Where are all the women?**

A lightbulb moment about the lack of women at a port industry event last year spurred Raj Kehal-Livi to quit her job and found a campaign to change gender bias in the sector. She talks to Bridge about the Women in Ports campaign and the key issues she aims to tackle.

34 **Taking flight**

A project 26 years in the making, RSPB Saltholme is a jewel in Teesside's crown. A partnership between the Teesside Environmental Trust (TET) and the RSPB, TET chairman David Kitchen and RSPB's Chris Francis explain more about its past, present and future.



40 **My Tees Valley**

Redcar MP Anna Turley talks about reelection, her love of the beach and her hopes for the future as she considers what she loves about her adopted home in the Tees Valley.

44 **River Tees Roundup**

Highlights of exciting developments taking place around the River Tees and Tees Valley.

46 **Local Hero**

Actor Mark Benton is one of TV's most recognisable faces after a 30 year career on stage and screen. He tells Bridge's Vicki Henderson about his upbringing, how he'd love a season ticket for the Boro and his favourite ever job, filmed this summer at home in Middlesbrough.



Credits

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Foreword from **Kirsten Donkin**, Editor.

Dear Reader, welcome to the latest edition of Bridge, as we continue to share and highlight the people and businesses working together to achieve the ambitions and potential of the region.

Industrialist Andrew Carnegie once famously said: “Teamwork is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results.”

Since the dawn of time, human beings have banded together to achieve shared aims, bringing together varying skills, ideas and strengths for the common good.

The people of Teesside are renowned for their sense of community and willingness to step up to help out a neighbour when needed. No surprise, then, that this sense of community, collaboration and partnership extends to those businesses and organisations working on and around the River Tees.

Teesside stands at the edge of a new industrial revolution, the energy transition. We must ensure we are ready for the opportunities and the challenges it will bring, by working together to upskill our workforce, prepare the next generation and have the infrastructure necessary to succeed.

In this edition, our contributors share their differing experiences of partnership working, such as the shared endeavour of the Teesside Environmental Trust and the RSPB to create the world class bird sanctuary at Saltholme or the work by Women in Ports founder Raj Kehal-Livi to bring like-minded people together to solve the gender bias issue in the port sector.

Our lead feature in this edition is PD Ports’ new chief people and compliance officer, Michelle

Robson, who speaks about her first months getting to know the Tees and her thoughts on how the company can develop ready for the future, while retaining its historic culture built across the generations.

We are also very pleased to welcome Chris Shirling-Rooke, chief executive of industry organisation Maritime UK, who gives his thoughts on the need for collaboration across the sector. In breaking news, we are delighted to confirm the creation of a new Tees Maritime Cluster – Chris offers his insight into clusters already in operation around the UK and what makes Teesside a perfect addition to the cluster community. We will of course look to share more on the Tees Maritime Cluster, its set up, its partners and its goals in future editions.

The river community came together earlier this autumn to officially welcome the Emerald Duchess – PD Ports’ chief executive officer Frans Calje explains more about the special event.

We are extremely pleased to welcome contributions from Middlesbrough actor Mark Benton, sharing his passion for the region as our Local Hero; Transport for the North’s policy and strategy officer Donna Newsome; Zoe Lewis, principal/chief executive of Middlesbrough College and Redcar MP Anna Turley, who explains what makes the Tees Valley feel like home.

We hope you enjoy the latest edition of Bridge.



With a career spent in shipbuilding and the offshore oil and gas sector, **Michelle Robson** is no stranger to the importance of strength and collaboration in industrial clusters on the river. In her new role as PD Ports' chief people and compliance officer, she has a broad remit that oversees many of the company's interactions with the wider Tees community.

Getting to know you

I love getting out on to the river. It's from the water that you get a real sense of the river, how it all connects and works together.

I grew up on the Tyne, with my first job in the shipyards, before moving into the oil and gas offshore sector, so the water has always been at the heart of my career journey.

Working on the Tees for the first time, having joined PD Ports earlier this year, I was keen to get out on a vessel to get to know the river as quickly as possible.

From landside to waterside is so different, you get such a different lens – your view is totally different. You can work on the dock, but you don't know what the quay actually looks like until you're out on the water.

It's about taking in the business from all the angles possible. I had been driving around during my first days with the business and couldn't take in the geography of the river and all the different sites PD Ports has across Teesside.

Out on the river it all made sense, I could put it all together and see how connected it all was.

When I was looking to join PD Ports earlier this year I did a lot of research to understand the business and what it was all about. But it's only now I can see how entwined it is with the river as a whole, and more broadly across Teesside.

PD Ports is not just a business or an employer in the traditional sense. There are so many layers to its operations and so many touch points with third parties and stakeholders outside of its own sphere of activity.

Its role as Statutory Harbour Authority, alongside its commercial operations, is an obvious 'extra layer' to the business.

As Statutory Harbour Authority, we're responsible for a 12 mile stretch of the river, from the Tees Barrage out into the Tees Bay, as well as Port of Hartlepool.

My job title refers to people and compliance – two words that encompass a broad role that takes in executive responsibility for a whole host of functions across the business, from HR, communications, internal culture and learning and development, to health and safety, security and business resilience, plus the Harbour Office and the Harbour Police.

I also oversee our key responsibilities as the operator of a port of global significance, such as our compliance with the International Ship and Port Facility Security Code and regulations as laid down by the Department for Transport and Border Control.

We also have broader collaborations with many national and regional bodies, working in partnership to tackle issues including cross-border criminal activities and cyber crime.

And, in addition, I'm proud to have been tasked with leading PD Ports' push for net zero operations, as executive lead overseeing our sustainability strategy and its execution.

I've spent my first months here really getting to know the business and understanding our biggest opportunities and where we can be more effective collectively.

The thing I'm most impressed by is the collaborative approach – there are relationships and partnerships with external organisations at PD Ports that I've never seen in any other business.

“What drives someone at 3am on a Tuesday, in the rain, to get bulk product off a vessel?”

It’s about culture”

A big part of my remit is to develop strategies that will help PD Ports grow and develop, both organisationally and culturally.

There’s a lot happening within the business, and more broadly in the region, as we respond and flex to changes in the economy and the political climate. We need to shift and evolve, to respond to change and prepare for the future, without losing the heart of the business.

When I joined PD Ports, I made a point of getting out and about, meeting as many people as possible and getting embedded in some of the key functions and operational departments.

I have spent time in each part of our operations and functional areas, covering both dayshift and nightshift.

From the Harbour Police to being out on the road in one of our trucks, it’s so important to get as much insight as possible into the layers of the business.

We spend a lot of time discussing the direction of the business, which is great, but having a real understanding of the impact on the ground is where we best evaluate and understand how we can really add value.

I can’t do my job if I don’t understand what it’s like to stand on the dock in the rain at 3am, bringing in bulk product safely from a vessel.

If I don’t understand at that level what people are doing every day and night across this business, across the river, then it doesn’t matter what great strategy I come up with to improve things, it will never have the same impact.

What drives someone at 3am on a Tuesday, in the rain, to get bulk product off a vessel?

It’s about culture.

The port and maritime sector is built on a culture that has developed and been handed down over many generations, shaped and moulded so that each port and terminal across the UK has a shared – but individual – sense of identity.

In a role such as mine, which is about driving change, you never want to break a culture – it’s more about how you evolve. It has to be agile and respect external influences.

It’s about celebrating what brought us to this point and then evolving to ensure our future as a business – I don’t want to employ people for today only, it’s about employing generations from now. That’s what will bring us success.

A key piece of work will be around skills – keeping the future workforce flowing, making sure they have the training and ambitions needed to help us, and the wider region, to grow and take our place in the energy transition.



Again – PD Ports is not just an inward-looking business. We do have another role as an engager and influencer in wider forums. Some 80% of our supply chain is based in Teesside and means we have a real impact across the area.

We are a strong voice for the region. As a strong voice we can shout for the region socially, as well as economically.

We’ve got huge opportunity within Teesside from a business lens but equally we’ve got huge unemployment, and underemployment, and other socio-economic challenges. But, if we can harness the right mechanisms, we can set up systems so that young people can learn and earn at the same time, breaking some of those barriers to further education and training.

There’s so much we can achieve. I’m still finding my way in this business, learning about its many layers and influences, but I’m excited about where we can go, together.

We will continue to grow and develop as a business, asking some challenging questions about what we want to achieve and how we’re going to do it, but always keeping that spirit of collaboration and an eye on what’s best for the Tees.

With a remit to develop and promote the strategic ambitions and priorities of the upper half of England, Transport for the North represents the needs and demands of more than 16 million people and 1.1 million businesses. Here, **Donna Newsome**, principal policy and strategy officer for the organisation, explains why improving the movement of goods around the region is key to success.

Why connectivity matters

At Transport for the North (TfN) we have a particular focus on connecting our great towns, cities and economic hubs pan-regionally, and those vital connections to and from the North as well. Moving people is important to us. But equally, so is moving goods. Freight requirements are embedded in our work at TfN. But why?

Transport for the North (TfN) is a statutory Sub-national Transport Body. We are made up of elected and business leaders from across the north of England, representing the region's 16 million citizens and 1.1 million businesses.

Our role is to advise Government on the strategic ambitions and priorities for the north's transport system, informed by our local knowledge, expertise and evidence.

In 2016, we published the Northern Powerhouse Independent Economic Review, which set out that the productivity of the north was 25% below the national average.

That gap still persists today, and transport is a key enabler to help close it.

Freight and logistics were identified as a sector that can underpin economic growth in the north, building on our already strong

credentials when it comes to major ports. For example, Teesport – strategically located on the east coast – serves as a vital gateway for international trade and supports the north's economy by facilitating the import and export of goods.

It not only enables access to global markets, it also attracts businesses and industries that rely on efficient logistics and supply chains.

But we know that there are connectivity challenges between the north's ports and our inland transport networks that need to be addressed to help unlock sustainable economic growth.

Teesport benefits from strong road connections, particularly with the nearby A19 and A66 to link it to the UK's motorway network.

“There are shared ambitions to enhance trade routes, bolster international competitiveness, and unlock new opportunities for economic growth”



“We are united in our aspiration to increase the volume of freight moved by rail”



However, there is room for improvement when it comes to congestion on roads during peak periods, as well as public transport options for employees and visitors.

The port's rail infrastructure supports significant freight movement, making it well-suited for bulk cargo and container transport. But in terms of inland transport constraints, rail is problematic when it comes to unlocking sustainable growth ambitions.

TfN and PD Ports are united in our aspiration to increase the volume of freight moved by rail.

Capacity constraints, short passing loops, gaps in electrification and gauge clearance limitations mean that freight paths across the north are convoluted.

In addition to this, we need rail freight to be an attractive alternative to road. In our Strategic Transport Plan 'Transforming the North' we make the case for investment in the north's freight network and set out that we want to see a threefold increase in rail's share of freight carried by 2050.

We are working with our industry partners to deliver that ambition. For instance, we are actively involved in the development of the Trans-Pennine Route Upgrade and have contributed towards securing full gauge clearance and additional freight paths that will greatly benefit east-west freight movements across the north.

When it comes to road, TfN works closely with National Highways to encourage investment in infrastructure to ensure our network is safe, reliable, efficient and resilient.

We have advocated for upgrades to the A19, including the Norton to Wynyard improvements completed in 2021 and for transformational improvements to the A66.

TfN is strongly promoting the need for upgrading the A66, including the full dualling between Scotch Corner and Penrith. This route is critically important for road freight and for

connecting the two northern 'Energy Coasts', home to nationally important and growing energy generation capabilities, advanced manufacturing and defence industries.

TfN is also ambitious for decarbonisation. We are committed to a pan-regional near zero carbon surface transport system by 2045 and warmly welcome PD Ports' ambition to achieve net zero operations by 2040.

The north's leaders are ambitious and TfN is working with them to unlock opportunities to decarbonise transport – including heavy goods vehicles.

Whilst there is uncertainty around the direction of future fuels and technology, TfN envisage that there is likely to be a blend of localised solutions across the North.

As such, we have invested time in producing visualiser tools for spatially forecasting future demand of electric vehicle charging infrastructure and also likely locations where there could be sufficient demand for start-up hydrogen re-fuelling locations. We will continue to work together with our partners in pursuit of our decarbonisation goals.

Recent discussions with PD Ports and other major ports in the north have re-emphasised the importance of a collaborative approach in addressing the region's connectivity challenges in order to deliver sustainable and inclusive growth.

A recent roundtable session, hosted by TfN with the north's major ports, demonstrated shared ambitions to enhance trade routes, bolster international competitiveness, and unlock new opportunities for economic growth.

We were able to share the discussion themes with the TfN board in September, and will continue working with our partners, like PD Ports, to secure investment in the North's transport infrastructure that will enable better connections across our region, as well as to and from our region.



As one of the largest industries in the UK, the maritime sector is complex and wide-ranging, comprising a vast array of businesses, organisations and stakeholders. Providing a single voice in support of the industry, and a link with government, Maritime UK aims to bring the sector together, to create growth and drive development. Here chief executive **Chris Shirling-Rooke** speaks to Bridge and explains more about Maritime UK and its support for the newly-announced Tees Maritime Cluster



Banging the drum for the UK's maritime industry

“Maritime is the greatest industry in the world, and the UK is a world leader - we need to shout louder about that,” says Chris Shirling-Rooke.

As an island nation, maritime is in the UK's DNA. But despite being one of the country's largest industries – worth £116 billion a year to the national coffers – it is perhaps one of the most low-key, quietly and efficiently getting on with the job of keeping food on our plates and our vehicles fuelled.

Working to bring together the many strands and sectors that make up the industry is Maritime UK, an independent organisation that acts as a single voice to government on the key issues facing operators and supply chain.

With campaigns including a push to improve skills and career opportunities for young people, better diversity and inclusion across the industry and leading efforts to establish maritime clusters – which now includes a Tees Maritime Cluster, announced early December – Maritime UK aims to be a champion for the sector.

Chief executive Chris Shirling-Rooke, who joined the organisation in 2023, said the need for a single, independent, voice for the maritime sector was recognised by the previous governments.

“The maritime sector is huge and so diverse, with many different needs across different industries within and across the nations and regions of the UK – it's bigger than aviation and rail combined,” he said.

“You can imagine, with that many competing voices, it was difficult to get clear and coherent messaging into government.

“The industry needed to collaborate more closely and align its messaging and so, Maritime UK was formed to be that single voice and point of contact.”

Membership of Maritime UK is made up of various industry representative bodies from across the sector, from ports, shipping, leisure (including the cruise ship sector), professional services and engineering.

Based on current industry figures, the maritime sector is worth some £116bn a year to the UK economy and employs 1.1m people.

Chris explains: “It has long been felt by many of our members – such as the British Ports Association, Trinity House, the Nautilus Union and others – that the sector, being the size and strength it is, could and should do much more around skills, careers and inclusion.

“As an organisation Maritime UK will never go into technical issues such as around shipping or ports – the individual sector representative bodies are best placed to do that and speak on their own behalf. But we will bang the drum for the maritime industry more widely.

“We work with the government to run programmes around careers, skills, and

inclusion and work more widely to really showcase the importance of the industry to as wide an audience as possible.

“While we don't lobby, we do make sure that all the industry stakeholders are fully aware of the needs and benefits of maritime.”

Decarbonisation and the UK's journey towards net zero are also high on the agenda for Maritime UK, with involvement in a number of spending reviews, which include securing from government £206m for the Clean Maritime Demonstration Competition, which is part of efforts to decarbonise the industry.

“Some of the incredible things happening within the cruise line sector and in ports is game changing in the push for net zero and initiatives happening around decarbonisation and sustainability in maritime I think will be rolled out more broadly,” notes Chris.

Chris joined Maritime UK from his CEO role at Mersey Maritime, one of the UK's first maritime clusters, and was a key part of efforts

to expand the cluster programme, working with the previous Conservative government – and the new Labour administration – to formally create several new clusters.

A new Tees Maritime Cluster – with the bid led by PD Ports alongside AV Dawson, Casper Shipping, the Tees and Hartlepool Ports Users Association and Womble Bond Dickinson – was formally announced by the Department for Transport in December.

The successful new cluster will be run by an independent board and self-finance, with the aim of accelerating economic growth in Teesside by harnessing the strength and vision of the region's dynamic maritime sector and championing efforts to become a leading hub for the UK's net zero ambitions.

Chris explains: “Maritime is a huge tent – there are hundreds, if not thousands, of cogs that are intertwined to make sure we are fed, fuelled and supplied as a nation.





“Teesside has a everything needed for a dynamic, impactful maritime eco system- if we can harness that, the region can champion and promote itself, locally, nationally and internationally”

“It’s also a sector that, as well as the ‘traditional’ operational roles within ports and shipping, also has so many other critical roles making it successful. Think marine lawyers, university lecturers, shipbuilders, insurance providers, data experts, undersea cable layers and many, many more, all making the sector thrive.

“Working in Merseyside we could see the value of a geographic area with an industry focus – a cluster. It’s very common in the automotive industry in Germany.

“In terms of its bid to become a cluster, Teesside has everything needed for a dynamic, impactful maritime eco system- if we can harness that and bring everyone together with one voice, the region can champion and promote itself, locally, nationally and internationally.”

Maritime UK encourages and supports inter-cluster collaboration among the established clusters, which include the Cornwall Marine Network, Maritime UK Solent, Maritime UK South West, Mersey, the Humber Marine Alliance and the Scottish Maritime Clusters, working together and sharing best practice and ideas.

The clusters are set up to be independent and transparent, aiming to boost the industry’s competitiveness and efficiencies.

Chris highlights Teesside’s High Tide Foundation, which offers young people aged 14–18 experiences in the port and maritime sectors, as a great example of how clusters can work.

“High Tide is like a small version of a cluster already at work in Teesside – it’s an apolitical and non-competitive organisation, funded and supported by a number of maritime-linked businesses in the region, that has a single focus of introducing young people to the maritime sector.

“Young people are key, we need their ideas and their inspiration.

“Clusters are good at delivering ‘levelling up’ – it’s not about north or south, it’s about each regional area working together to develop a mechanism for growth that works for them.

“Every region is unique – this is not a one size fits all programme. Teesside has strengths and attributes that nowhere else in the country has and the new cluster will be formulated to make the most of those attributes and to show them off as widely as possible.

“Clusters are a perfect example of industry and government working together to achieve growth – the new Government can see the value of the programme and we’re looking forward to what can be achieved in Teesside and beyond in the maritime sector.

“It is through Maritime UK and the clusters that the maritime sector can speak as one and streamline their efforts to be heard in Westminster and beyond.”





To celebrate the arrival of the Emerald Duchess on Teesside this summer, hundreds of business leaders, maritime experts and representatives of organisations linked to the river were invited to witness her formal naming – or christening – ceremony. PD Ports chief executive officer **Frans Calje** explains more about the special event.

Welcome to Teesside – celebrating the power of collaboration

The arrival of the Emerald Duchess on the Tees characterises PD Ports' commitment to the river communities it serves.

At £23m the Emerald Duchess is one of the largest one-off investments in PD Ports' recent history.

Designed with sustainability in mind, the Emerald Duchess is green not only in colour, but in the very core of her design. She is embodiment of our commitment as a business to make sustainable long-term decisions in all that we do.

Given the scale of the investment, and the importance of daily maintenance dredging to the safe and effective operation of the river, it was only right to mark the occasion by inviting our friends, stakeholders and collaborators from across the region to join us in christening our new vessel.



“We must work together to create a legacy that will continue to serve those that come after us.”

It was a true pleasure to bring so many people together under one roof, to talk about the future and the potential of Teesport as we look ahead to the energy transition.

Collaboration – partnership working – is what keeps the river flowing and the wheels of industry turning, each and every day.

We need to harness that spirit of collaboration and move forward as one in pursuit of shared goals. We must work together to create a legacy that will continue to serve those that come after us.

By boosting trade and strengthening our economy, the port community in Teesside can have a knock-on effect across the region that will echo across the generations. I firmly believe we have it in our grasp to achieve that.

The impact of our actions now can ripple forward, setting off chain reactions and provoking lasting change. We must ensure we benefit the many, not the few.

My thanks go to everyone who joined us that day, in particular the students from Stockton Riverside College and staff from Etc who supported the running of the event as part of our commitment to offer meaningful work experience opportunities to young people wherever possible.

Our river community can achieve great things – lets continue to work together in the spirit of collaboration.



As long serving Principal/Chief Executive of Middlesbrough College Group, overseeing some 11,000 students and apprentices, plus 2,000 employers each year, **Zoe Lewis** is a voice of authority on the issue of skills in Teesside. Actively involved in shaping policy both locally and nationally, she has chosen to write on the topic in her own style for Bridge

The problem with skills

Whenever I am asked to write an article about skills, it's so easy to revert to type. To set out all the ways FE colleges can support an employer's needs. To encourage engagement, to be humble about the challenges, to promote our strengths and external accolades, to be ambitious for our young people and our businesses and to be optimistic for the future of our area.

But, as I sat thinking about how to approach this particular article, hot off the back of a number of roundtables, and with a new government at the helm, I thought instead that I would shine an alternative light on the 'problem with skills'.

The problem with skills has always existed
 From Victorian ship builders to digital wizards
 Youngsters are just not the same now they say
 They just don't work hard, like they did in my day

The problem with skills has been made worse since COVID
 These phones are the problem – there is no doubt about it
 If only they stopped texting in three letter words, and
 Left their bedrooms more often to communicate with others

The problem with skills – is everyone knows best
 We all went to school and have views on those tests
 In the workplace we see it, as vacancies rise
 In the pub with our friends, we can all roll our eyes

The problem with skills is we've too many graduates
 You should gain a trade, that will be useful to the masses
 The reality is, many rightly choose this path
 But with apprenticeship starts low where on earth can they start

The problem with skills is that transport is lacking
 Our young disadvantaged can't get out of this trapping
 The cost is too much and the service is bare
 But transport costs money so we'll devolve to the mayors

The problem with skills is we need far more STEM
 With higher level quals being the only gem
 But what about ESOL or Community learning
 Or functional skills to boost confidence and earning

The problem with skills is they choose the wrong course
 From hairdressing, media, criminology and more
 The reality is different, the data is clear
 As those in STEM sectors can't get experience for years

The problem with skills is the graduate debt
 With loans getting bigger and interest to regret
 With foundation years up and tariff points lowering
 4 years is the new norm as universities keep growing

The problem with skills is there's too much competition
 Removing duplication will improve all our offering
 This would certainly help – even providers agree
 Especially with profits going through ITPs

The problem with skills is the disadvantage attainment
 If only teachers worked harder to raise aspirations
 Teachers are leaving their jobs for elsewhere
 Their duties expanding, their stress hard to bear

The problem with skills is the system's too complex
 On that we agree with a minefield of acronyms
 From loans to bootcamps, T levels, HTQs
 To BELPs, SWAPs, IOTs and of course those NVQs!

The problem with skills is too much immigration
 They take all our jobs... but they are lazy and then some
 The reality is our demographic has aged
 But nobody wants to work longer to pay

The problem with skills is the shape of our economy
 The south east draws graduates, other regions left wobbly
 Centre for cities say we're too polarised
 An industrial strategy would surely be wise

The problem with skills is the number of qualifications
 Say bright civil servants who move jobs every 6 months
 Employers say differently we hear loud and clear
 Through LSIPs and others 'soft skills' is their cheer

The problem with skills is employers stopped investing
 A thirty-year decline in workplace and off the job training
 We'd rather pay more now and attract from competitors
 Than train for the future and lose them to our neighbours

The problem with skills is new staff are not ready
 To hit the ground running to make us some money
 Five years' experience – that is all that will do
 But I'll use my connections to get my son a job too

The problem with skills is a culture of not training
 In Europe a payment incentivises this framing
 But instead we insist employers do it themselves
 But why do we wait, whilst our productivity shelves

The problem with skills is FE colleges have no voice
 Parents are vote winners and Universities fill the Lords
 With our lobbying unheard and our voices not yet clear
 An opportunity exists to hear what colleges can bring to bear

The problem with skills is an underinvestment
 Through austerity and before, funding has been cut, frozen, downgraded
 As an OECD outlier in so many ways
 Until this fact changes we will write poems for ever and a day!

The problem with skills is it is easy to tinker
 With projects and products and badges to aim for
 Perhaps we should hold back on these short-term plans
 And put all of our hope into new Skills England.



A lightbulb moment about the lack of women at a port industry event last year spurred **Raj Kehal-Livi** to quit her job and found a campaign to change the gender bias in the sector. Here she tells Bridge about the Women in Ports campaign and the keys issues she aims to tackle.

Where are all the women? Tackling gender bias in the UK port sector

I was at an industry event last year and I looked around the room, probably about five people in the whole room were women.

I just thought – we're in 2023, why is that still the case?
Where are all the women?



I had worked at Port of London Authority for a decade, as head of stakeholder engagement. I'd been to plenty of events where I was in the minority as a woman but at that event I realised it was just always the same faces.

It was at that event I met Liz Law, PD Ports' chief financial officer, and we had a great conversation. Where are all the women in the UK port sector?

In the days and weeks that followed, I spoke to contacts at various membership bodies I was connected with to see if I could start a project to improve the situation around the lack of women in ports.

I soon realised that in order to fully immerse myself in this, and to really have any kind of impact, I needed to take it on as a full-time job. So, after Christmas last year I told my husband I wanted to quit my job and really make a go of the campaign, and here I am!

Women in Ports is based around a digital platform that provides information and resources, available to anyone in the port sector – male or female – to support efforts to make the port industry a more inclusive place.

I want it to be a campaign that brings the port sector across the UK together, to make connections between individuals and so we work together to recognise some of the issues the sector faces.

In this first year I've been going around the UK ports, interviewing people and gathering stats to have real qualitative data to use as a baseline and to understand some of the recurring themes.

It's been so interesting to hear some of the struggles and the challenges in the sector, but also the causes for celebration. Not every woman has a sad story to tell, there are plenty that have found really fulfilling careers in ports.

It's just as important to celebrate and highlight those successes too.

The Women in Ports platform will also be supported by a podcast series, interviewing women across a variety of roles, of all ages, to hear their stories.

It's so important to get that diversity of voice – I have lived experience of a southern port, which is a port authority, but very different in operation and function to many other ports in the UK.

It's vital too that I understand what the industry as a whole wants too. Everyone I've met so far on my journey has been really supportive in my ambition to drive this forward.

I've visited Teesport a couple of times this year and met some fantastic women – and some fantastically supportive men – to gather their thoughts and hear what's going on in Teesside.

PD Ports is doing great things with its Women's Network Group, led by Patti Burt and Liz Law, but there are universal themes facing women in Teesport and across the UK while working in a male-dominated environment.

Some of the key themes that have been raised so far include psychological safety – such as the fears behind working on a dock at night as



“We need to do so much more to bring young people into the port industry”

a lone woman – the language of job adverts, the historical perception of ports ‘not being for women’, the importance of reputation and role models in the industry and senior female leaders and the battle with PPE.

The Women in Ports platform will provide tools and resources to help challenge these issues.

Accessibility in this industry is poor – if you're a young person in a junior role in the northern port, it's unlikely that you're going to be able to attend an event in London at a cost of £200 or more.

We need to ensure there are opportunities for people across the country for personal development and networking – regional events and a digital platform.

So far in this project some of the biggest allies have been men – we absolutely can't leave men out of the conversation or ignore what they have to say on the matter.

In the early stages at least, they will be the key drivers around this, because they are in the majority.

The platform will be a place for the port sector to visit when they're looking for best practice in particular areas, for example how to word job advertisements in a way that

don't unintentionally exclude women, or how mentoring schemes can have most success.

The most important this is that the success of women in ports can't happen without a celebration of the sector as a whole. We need to do so much more to bring young people into the port industry.

I ended up working in the port sector by chance – had been travelling and when I came back I was living in Gravesend with my parents. The biggest employer locally was the Port of London Authority, but I really had no idea what that was.

I ended up with a temporary role working for the Chief Harbour Master and I never looked back. I got immersed in the industry and it's given me so much – I want other people to know what the port sector has to offer.

Considering it's the lifeline of the UK economy and our international trade, it's an industry that's not promoted enough and I want to be part of the push to overcome that.

By supporting women to consider the port sector as a place to build their career, we can be part of the push to improve recruitment across the board and help the industry to thrive.

RSPB Saltholme is a jewel in Teesside's crown – a haven for the dozens of bird species that visit each year and with a commitment to protect and encourage wildlife around the site. Born of a collaboration between the Teesside Environmental Trust (TET) and the RSPB, Saltholme has been a project 26 years in the making. Here, TET chairman **David Kitchen** and RSPB senior site manager **Chris Francis** explain more

Taking flight – from farmland to birding sanctuary

The River Tees is synonymous with the heavy industry along its banks, chimneys and oversize buildings creating a vista that dominates the skyline. But tucked in its midst is sanctuary – in every sense of the word.

Covering more than 660 acres, dotted with ponds and waterways, intertidal zones and open grassland, RSPB Saltholme is a patch of peace and tranquillity among the activity.

Situated on a former ICI experimental development farm for its fertiliser division, the site has been rejuvenated and carefully developed over the last 26 years to become a renowned bird sanctuary and a designated site of special scientific interest (SSSI).

The long-standing partnership sees landowner the Teesside Environmental Trust (TET) continue to act as the main funder for the site, while the daily management of land and visitor attraction, and project leadership and design – working to a five year plan – is led by the tenant, the RSPB.

To date, TET has provided £12m of funding for Saltholme including bird hides, an ornamental garden, a children's play area, as well as supporting the variety of water bodies and wetlands.

A key factor in the success of the site is the ongoing funding of TET itself by waste management company Augean, through landfill tax credits, which provides the organisation with a substantial sum each year.

TET chairman David Kitchen says: “The relationship with RSPB is one of partnership to make Saltholme the best it can be. We are sort of joined at the hip. We can't do what we do without them, they can't do what they do without us.

“From the earliest days – when we had no money and used to meet in a joinery shop at Preston Farm – we always had a vision for Saltholme and in 2026 it will be complete.”

Chris Francis, senior site manager for RSPB Saltholme, says the support from TET is vital to allow habitat creation at the site.

“We're one of 200 RSPB sites nationally,” he says. “Understandably the charity couldn't support us at the level TET do, so it gives us an amazing opportunity to really make a difference here at Saltholme.”





A brief history

The Teesside Development Corporation, formed in 1987, was set up to achieve five flagship redevelopment projects, four of which came to fruition – the Tees Barrage, Hartlepool Marina, Teesside Park and the Teesdale Business Park in Thornaby.

A fifth project – to create a nature reserve ‘of national importance’ was not achieved by the time the development corporation was wound up in April 1998.

It had, however, acquired the land at Saltholme and a new board – what would become the Teesside Environmental Trust – was formed.

TET chairman David Kitchen was a founding board member. He says: “Our sole objective was to create the nature reserve, but in the early days we didn’t have a bean. We had great ambitions but no money.

“We did though have land – 660 acres of land that had previously been the ICI fertiliser development farm.

“The board of 12 people was made up of four politicians, four businesspeople and four nature conservationists.

“However, we soon realised we needed experts for habitat creation – we didn’t reinvent the wheel, we knew we needed an organisation like the RSPB that has a track record and the skills, as well as a similar objective to us.”

TET successfully partnered with the RSPB in 2007, with the official opening of the specially-designed visitor centre taking place in 2009.

The site attracts thousands of visitors each year and runs a successful education programme that brings up to 4,000 children for visits each year.

David adds: “It’s been a massive success, and the high quality of the visitor centre stood for everything we wanted to achieve as an organisation.

“Everything we do we want it to be an exemplar, to be the best it can be.”

The focus of the RSPB has been to improve and extend the habitat at Saltholme to encourage as many, and as many types, of birds as possible to the site.

A 2002 survey found there were just two pairs of common terns – thanks to the efforts of the RSPB staff and volunteers, a recent survey showed some 500 pairs.

Chris Francis says: “There’s been a long history of people watching birds on this site. Teesmouth is very important for birds, particularly over the winter months. We get birds from the Arctic Circle that winter here and have done for generations.”

David Kitchen adds: “It’s like a motorway service station for birds.

“We welcome geese from the arctic circle, swifts on their way to Namibia. It’s wonderful to see.”

Looking to the future

The work to develop the reserve at Saltholme has taken 26 years, with other projects funded by TET including nesting islands for common terns in the main pond and the construction of a predator fence around the perimeter of the site to prevent foxes targeting ground nesting birds.

The final piece of the puzzle is an area of land next to Port Clarence which will be improved in partnership with the Environment Agency, with work underway and expected to be ready by 2026.

David Kitchen says: “When that work is done it will mean that Saltholme is ‘complete’ and a superb achievement. It’s taken 26 years but it’s a massive achievement for everyone involved.

“We’re very keen to encourage local community groups and schools to visit Saltholme and to use the expertise here to perhaps develop their own habitat and a love for nature in young people.”

For Chris Francis, there remains plenty to do at Saltholme, including land outside its boundaries, as he explains some of the projects the organisation has underway with other stakeholders in the area.

“I think we’ll never stop tinkering at Saltholme,” he says. “The RSPB has a project underway in conjunction with Stockton Borough Council for some land to the south of the site which represents a £7m investment – we’re hoping to see diggers on the ground by 2026.

“We also have some former farmland towards Cowpen Bewley where we’re doing a rewilding project of the arable fields, seeing what happens if we leave it to regenerate.”

Projects are also underway with the Environment Agency to support the estuary, which Chris estimates saw 85% of land lost to redevelopment in the 20th Century.

“The estuary has suffered a lot, so the projects we’re working on will hopefully allow the sea to get back in again and recreate some habitat that was lost.”

Meanwhile, TET is beginning to turn its attention to other nature-based projects in the area, providing seedcorn funding to help groups get established, including Teesmouth Seal Conservation Trust (TSCT) which is preparing to open a seal hospital on South Gare for the harbour and common seals in the Tees.

David says: “Saltholme doesn’t have a marine habitat for obvious reasons, so we were pleased to support TSCT in their aims to create a conservation centre, that will hopefully one day become a community and education facility out at South Gare.

“We see it as our new 10-year vision, where we become a facilitator for conservation projects, as well as doing it ourselves. We’ve finished Saltholme and now we’re moving on to help other people achieve their goals.”

He adds: “We have to look after the river – the quality of the water has improved markedly since the 1970s but it has dropped in the last

three years. If we don’t look after these things they will suffer, its very delicate.

“People think things like seagrass and oysters returning to the river are a fantasy, but that dream is being realised thanks to the Tees Rivers Trust.

“At TET we are creating inter-tidal habitat for birds next to the mud flats on the river. It used to be saltmarsh – the whole of the Tees estuary was saltmarsh – but it was ‘reclaimed’ to create Seal Sands in the 70s. That’s something that would never happen today.

“Our future lies in facilitating and seed corn funding other organisations and working with communities to do what they want to do to improve their surroundings.

“We want people to come to us and say ‘we’ve got this patch of land, can you help us?’

“I’m very proud of what we’ve achieved in the last 26 years.”





As MP for Redcar, **Anna Turley** has been at the forefront of some of the major events to face the town in recent years. Re-elected for a second time earlier this year, she tells Bridge what she hopes to achieve with her party now in Government and what makes Teesside feel like home.

My Tees Valley

Teesside is very much a part of me and what drives me. I wasn't born here, but it's where my heart lies.

I'm a resident of the town like any other. I use the same shops and roads and services as anyone else.

For me, Redcar is like no other place in the country.

This is one of the most incredible places. It gets into your bloodstream, into your DNA.

It's a place that likes to stand on its own two feet. It's full of determination and resilience. People work hard and conduct themselves with dignity, and I respect that.

Redcar is imbued with history but it has so much potential in its future. Redcar helped to forge the industrial revolution and it can do that again.

It's a fact that Teesside has never been as successful as its potential suggests. There's always something more to work towards, somewhere further to go.

Right now, Teesside is on the precipice of its greatest potential yet – the energy transition and the push for net zero.

It could be a new industrial revolution, a green revolution. Once again, Teesside can be at its heart.

It's a fantastic moment to be involved in the tipping point between past and future – a moment that will embody the transition that the UK and the world is making to a positive industrial future.

I first came here in 2012 and fell in love with Redcar. I was born in Kent and lived in London, but my heart is here.

You've got the hustle and bustle of industry, with so much activity on the river and at

Wilton, and the contrast of the Eston Hills and the moors beyond. The drama and the tranquillity, side by side.

I was so extremely proud to win the election in 2015 and to win it back in 2024 was a wonderful moment.

In 2015 the steel works closed and a lot of my time was spent supporting the workers alongside the community. It was a really difficult period, a shocking period really.

Good, secure, well-paid jobs were lost. For a lot of people, their identity was tied up with the steel works. We tried to look after people and get them reskilled and retrained, to limit the economic hit to the town as much as possible.

There was amazing resilience and a real sense of community.

In my first period as MP, Labour were in opposition, which was often difficult and frustrating – you come into politics wanting to change the world but in opposition you feel like you are shouting into the void.

And then we lost the election in 2019, and I lost my seat. I didn't want to move away, this is my home. I didn't necessarily feel I would come back into politics but I was lucky to find work in the area and was able to stay.

In the end I was honoured by how many people wanted me to stand in 2024 and so, here I am again, MP for Redcar. This time, though, we're in Government and I feel I can really bang the drum for Redcar and Teesside.

I'm really excited to make sure Redcar and Cleveland, and wider Teesside, are right there in the Government's thoughts when the big decisions and investments are being made, to ensure the region can be great again.

“This is one of the most incredible places. It gets into your bloodstream, into your DNA”





“Teesside is on the precipice of its greatest potential yet – the energy transition and the push for net zero”

Life's a beach

The beach was the first thing I saw when I came to Redcar and I fell in love with it right then. I walk on it every day, although I sadly lost my dog recently.

That sense of peace and beauty – like so much of Teesside – is underestimated.

Of course Redcar isn't the only amazing beach locally – Saltburn, Marske and South Gare are all wonderful and we are so lucky with this little corner that we have. It's where I go to clear my head and have peace.

A sense of community

A sense of resilience – that's what I found in Teesside that I've never found anywhere else I've lived or worked. People really work together here.

It's because of that spirit of togetherness, that community fabric, that Redcar will always survive and flourish.

There is a role for Government to play to support and enable communities and not allow them to be divided and fragmented – we need to support community infrastructure.

A place of two sides

Country versus industry. Future versus past. Opportunity versus deprivation.

This should be a brilliant place to grow up. But too often children here are held back from achieving their potential. There's a lack of access to some of the basic things that other kids have, that drive ambition and a desire to work.

However long I'm MP for Redcar, I'll work to break down the barriers and make sure every child is valued and has the same chances as any other child in the country.



River Tees Roundup

Highlights of exciting developments taking place on the River Tees and across the Tees Valley

Call for skills boost for region's young people by Labour conference delegation

A delegation of leaders working in education and training across the Tees Valley attended the Labour party conference to urge Government action to support the region's young people.

The conference fringe event, hosted by PD Ports and supported by Redcar MP Anna Turley, saw discussions about the barriers faced by young people including a lack of entry-level jobs, inaccessibility of jobs and training due to the high cost of public transport, the importance of promoting careers in primary school and improving the visibility of job opportunities with SMEs.

PD Ports Executive Chairman, Jerry Hopkinson, said: "The huge wealth of experience represented at the event offered invaluable insights and ideas about how the Government can help more young people to achieve their aspirations, both in the Tees Valley and beyond.

"We really hope that the event will provide a strong foundation for making a positive difference to the communities we are part of."

The delegation from the Tees Valley also included: Grant Glendinning, CEO, Education



Training Collective; Claire Preston, operations director, Power of Women; Zoe Lewis, CEO, Middlesbrough College; Lauren Bywater, general manager, High Tide Foundation; Emma Gregory, UK Government Affairs, The Prince's Trust; Jacqui Hutchinson, Education,

Employment and Skills Lead and Primary Careers Co-ordinator (Building our Futures) for Redcar and Cleveland Voluntary Development Agency and Richard Ballantyne, CEO, British Ports Association.

Middlesbrough named UK's fast growing tech hub

Middlesbrough has been named as the leading hub for tech firms outside of London, and the fastest growing in the UK, by industry experts.

The 2024 UK Tech Jobs Report ranks Middlesbrough as sixth overall, with 165 tech firms based in the town.

Although a lower total figure than other leading areas, all based with London, Middlesbrough is recognised by the report as the fastest growing UK tech destination, with a growth rate of 13.79% in the last year.

The report cements Middlesbrough's increasing reputation in the sector, where it has become a hub for both established and start-up companies looking to make use of its tech infrastructure and talent pool.

The report notes: "With a combination of rapid growth, rising wages and excellent living conditions, the town is poised to become one of the UK's most sought-after locations for tech innovation."

Among the tech success stories in Middlesbrough are games developers Double Eleven, Radical Forge and Behaviour UK.

Also based in Middlesbrough are sales specialists Salesfire and ITS, one of Europe's leading automation and management information system providers.

The wider Teesside area also includes eCommerce software specialists Visualsoft; software solutions firm Fitfactory; Tricore Technical Services, and offshore installations and energy data specialist EnAppSys.

Clean energy scholarship to support push to equip young people with skills for future employment

Efforts to equip Teesside's future workforce with skills for employment in lower carbon energy have been boosted with the addition of 20 new Teesside Clean Energy Technician scholars at Redcar and Cleveland College.

The college is working with energy giant bp to give school leavers the training and inspiration to access future quality jobs in renewable and low carbon industries and at the same time encourage more women and girls to consider careers in engineering.

The students were presented with branded overalls and personal protective equipment from the energy company at an official presentation at the college.

The scholarships come as the Government announced billions of pounds of funding over 25 years to Net Zero Teesside, led by bp and Equinor, a carbon capture, utilisation and storage plant.

The NZT power station will be built on the Teesworks site in Redcar, with operations expected to start in 2027.

The college's head of construction, engineering and service industries, Emma Booth, said: "These students are embarking on a flagship programme, developing invaluable skills in engineering that will open doors to in-demand careers and educational opportunities.

"The opportunities afforded to all the scholars cannot be overestimated in terms of knowledge, experience and making industry links, all at the very earliest point in their

future career.

"We are confident our scholars will become competitive assets in the job market, well prepared for future challenges in the sector."

First launched with 21 scholars last year, the Teesside Clean Energy Technician scholarship is primarily aimed at school leavers aged 16 to 18 and delivered from Redcar and Cleveland College's Clean Energy Education Hub, opened in 2023.



Sustainability awards win for PD Ports at industry ceremony

PD Ports was proud to receive the Port Sustainability Award at this year's British Ports Association Conference.

The award recognised the company's efforts to reach carbon-neutral status at its landside operations at Teesport, and its wider aims to reach net zero across the business by 2040.

The award was collected by Harbour Master Paul Brooks and head of communications

Kirsten Donkin, who had also been part of a panel discussion at the conference focusing on skills and maritime careers for young people.

Richard Ballantyne, chief executive of the BPA, said: "Congratulations to all the winners, this was an excellent year for ports industry, which was reflected in the quality of nominations.

"All of the finalists demonstrated a high level of excellence and they showed the wide array of exciting developments and achievements there have been in our sector."





LOCAL HERO

Mark Benton

After a thirty year career on stage and screen, with a long list of some of the biggest shows on television to his name, Middlesbrough's Mark Benton is one of the UK's favourite actors. With his unmistakable Boro twang, Mark tells Bridge's Vicki Henderson about his road to success, his hopes for the film industry in the North East and his favourite job ever – becoming a drag queen in his home town.

There's no place like home

“Although home is with my wife and kids, which is down south, I still call Middlesbrough ‘home’. There is a big draw still to move back here, get a season ticket for the Boro.”

Mark Benton is a Boro lad through and through. Except for one small thing...

“I was actually born in Guisborough – there was no space at Middlesbrough General so my dad had to drive my mam to Guisborough to have me,” he laughs.

“But I grew up in Grangetown – Cardboard City as they called it – on Argyle Road. I had a really happy childhood, growing up with my parents and my sister and brother. It was a really great place to be.”

A love of performing emerged at an early age, including stints in both a heavy metal band and a funk band, inspired in part by his actor uncle, who went by the stage name Michael Gunn.

Recalling his uncle fondly, he says: “He used to come back from drama school when I was young and I used to look up to him and thought he was so cool, I wanted to be just like him.

“He once brought home a friend called Michael Beck who was in a programme that was popular at the time called Warriors and that was seriously cool.”

Firmly bitten by the acting bug, Mark took A-level drama and spent a year at the former Stockton and Billingham Technical College studying performing arts but hit the buffers when auditioning for drama school.

He says: “I auditioned for drama school at 18 and didn't get in – everyone else on my course did, so obviously that was embarrassing. I tried again at 20 and decided, if I didn't get in this time I'd do something else, teaching or something.

“My parents only had the money to pay for two auditions at London drama schools. My uncle had gone to Central College of Speech and Drama, so that's where I really wanted to go, and for the second one I just put down RADA, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

“I didn't get into Central but came home one day and there was a letter waiting for me – my mam passed me the envelope and it had RADA printed on it. It was really thin, so I assumed I hadn't got in, because if I had it would be a thick envelope full of information.

“But I remember opening it and just seeing ‘We are pleased...’

“I was laughing and crying at the same time, such an amazing feeling.”

Mark set off for London but, mindful that most people wouldn't think acting was a ‘proper job’ in the late eighties, would tell people he was a bricklayer when he visited home.

“It was a big wrench to leave,” he says. “Going to RADA, I thought I'd be out of place and it would be all private school kids who knew Shakespeare but it wasn't like that. There was such a mix of people, we had a really great year group.

“I had a wonderful time at drama school – it was three years of fun and hard work and discovering the big wide world.

“Coming from Middlesbrough, quite a small town, it was a real eye opener moving to London.”

Despite feeling a pull to come home to Grangetown, life had a different plan for Mark. He graduated from RADA in 1990 and settled in London, where the work and auditions were centralised.

He hit the ground running, first with a job in the National Theatre, quickly followed by a short film for Channel 4 and then a world tour, performing *As You Like It*.

On his return to the UK he joined the Royal Shakespeare Company.

“As a young lad from Middlesbrough, I thought it was all just amazing,” he says.

“I remember I rang my mam from the little phone box at RADA to tell her I'd got a job with the National Theatre and she said: ‘Is that good?’”

Mark's resume is as long as the Tees, but high-profile roles include *Waterloo Road*, *Shakespeare and Hathaway* and *Early Doors*, as well as a successful stint on *Strictly Come Dancing* in 2014, reaching week ten.



“I’ve had many jobs, a real variety, and I’ve been lucky to work my way up in TV and to continue to do so,” he says.

“It’s part luck and part hard work – for some there was an element of right place, right time.

“I’ve always thought that the work is the most important thing – it wasn’t about becoming a superstar. For one thing I’m not in the right casting bracket for that, but for me its about playing different characters – how can I change myself to become that character?

“I’ve still got lots of family and friends in Middlesbrough and they help me keep my feet on the ground”

Mark admits he still feels the pull for home, the chance to watch the Boro every week but, with his family happily settled down south, a permanent return to Teesside is off the cards.

However, thanks to his latest role – due to appear on BBC 1 later this year – he was able to spend the summer in Middlesbrough, filming new comedy Smoggie Queens.

Written by a Middlesbrough writer, Phil Dunning, the show follows five friends navigating love, life and pride for their home town.

Featuring a mostly native Boro cast, Mark says it’s the best job he’s ever done.

“It’s been so great to do a programme that’s ‘proppa Boro,” he says. “It’s fun and irreverent. People always want to talk about Teesside in a way that’s only about industry and misery and that’s just not what this place is at all.

“Programmes like this can show our love for the area and what it has to offer.

“The casting note was very specific, they wanted Boro accents, not Geordies!

“I’m not knocking the Geordie accent – let’s face it I’ve made a career playing Geordies – but Teesside has its own accent, and it was important to properly represent that.

“I had a fantastic summer back in Middlesbrough, wearing a dress and a wig for seven weeks. The show is such a laugh – I think if people give it a chance they’ll love it.”

The film industry is riding a wave in the North East at the moment, with major studios planned for both Sunderland and Hartlepool, and more opportunities for young people to find jobs and careers without needing to make the move to London.

“I really love that the studios are being built and that they’re going to other parts of the region, not just Newcastle,” he says. “Newcastle is great but it’s not the only place that deserves investment.

“People down south seem to think there’s just a wasteland between Newcastle and York but that’s just not true.

“There’s a lot going on in the television and film industry in the region but there are still frustrations – things that get filmed in this area without a single local actor for example, but hopefully with Smoggie Queens we can change that.

“The show is full of Middlesbrough humour – sharp and sarcastic but full of love. I can’t wait for people to see it and fall in love with the town as much as me.”

BRIDGE

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