



Endorsed by



Homes &
Communities
Agency



Award for regenerating rural communities, sponsored by North Hertfordshire Homes

Winner: The Highland Club, Fort Augustus, submitted by the Santon Group

St Benedict's Abbey in Fort Augustus in the Scottish Highlands started life as an English fort in 1729 before being captured by the Jacobites in 1745. The grade A-listed building was eventually passed on to the Benedictine Order and became a monastery, later serving as a boarding school for Catholic boys. After the school closed in 1993, the monks ran the enterprise as a heritage centre for several years, but by 1998 it had fallen into disrepair and was finally closed.

In 2004, developer Santon Group bought the ruin, gaining planning permission to convert the property and build 109 homes and communal facilities on the site. Completed in March 2012, the project comprises more than 18,000sq metres of buildings set within 20 acres of land on the southern shore of Loch Ness. The majority of residential units are rented as holiday lets, providing an influx of visitors to Fort Augustus, which, Santon says, has boosted the local economy.



The prosperity of Fort Augustus has followed the fortunes of the abbey: the village depends almost entirely on tourism and the abbey was its primary attraction; when the site closed, visitor numbers dried up and local hotels, cafes and bed & breakfast accommodation closed. The developer says that in 2003, Fort Augustus had a population of about 650 people and unemployment was more than 30 per cent.

However, Santon claims that the conversion scheme managed to reverse this trend, not only saving a significant piece of heritage, but also providing sustained local employment and reviving local businesses. The population of the settlement has now risen to 1,000 people and several small enterprises have been established to service the Highland Club.

The awards judges felt the scheme has managed to achieve a good balance between drawing in tourism cash and ensuring community involvement. "The conversion was really well done," says Paul Clarke, partner at property consultancy Bidwells. "It wasn't just a tourist venue. In rural regeneration schemes, it is notoriously difficult to keep the momentum going, but this scheme has done that."

Highly commended

Redefining Sturminster Newton, Dorset, submitted by the Matrix Partnership

The Station Road creamery in the Blackmore Vale town of Sturminster Newton closed in 2000, with the loss of around 60 jobs. The building has now been converted into a mixed-use scheme including a nursing home providing 60 new jobs, 46 new homes and commercial space. The judges felt the scheme has made a significant impact, getting to grips with local housing and employment issues.

Finalists

ArchWay Project, Alford, Lincolnshire, submitted by the Churches Conservation Trust

Heartlands, Camborne, Cornwall, submitted by Stride Treglown

Ferry Project, Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, submitted by the Luminus Ferry Project