

Skegness & Skateboarding. It's not quite Dogtown.

Being a skateboarder in Skegness felt like a million miles away from the dream life of California seen in movies and magazines. Sure, they both have a beach, but that's about it. For us, skateboarding was our lives. We were a group of friends who spent every waking moment thinking about the sport and every second we were not riding was spent drowning in fantasies of stateside skateparks that teased us from the pages of our skateboarding bible, Thrasher magazine.

Although now we have a British Olympic champion in Sky Browne, it wasn't long ago that skateboarding was considered something unconventional, uncool and uncouth. Skateparks were rare, skateboarding video games didn't exist and for the youth of Skegness, the skatepark before you was a thing of make-believe. Being a skateboarder in the 1990s didn't make you popular, but it definitely got you attention. All we wanted was somewhere to practice our sport in peace. All we got were sneers and hassle from townspeople and the sound of police sirens coming to move us along.

When a surf shop called "Coogee" opened in the late 90s, local youths who were into extreme sports took to it like a second home. Several conversations of "I wish that..." or "If only we could have somewhere to skate" began there. One day, with the owner Roy's help, we decided to do something about it.

We were realistic. We only wanted a small ramp or small area, but to us, that would be our Dogtown. Our first official meeting took place in the most seaside of ways, in the back of Salts chippy. With the smell of chips fresh from the fryer filling the air, we chatted, dreamed and schemed. Although we didn't realise it at the time, this meeting would soon be followed by hundreds more.

We managed to attract the ear of a local councillor who asked how they could help. Their suggestion was to turn up to the next council meeting and have our say. I'm not sure if over 20 skateboarders & BMXers turning up en masse to a council meeting was what they meant, but we went in and were given the floor. We spoke with lumps in our throats and did our best to show those in power that behind the anarchic stereotypes of skateboarders, was a group of passionate young people who wanted a safe space to participate in their sport.

Suddenly, we were meeting with the mayor of Skegness who asked how he could help. The police went from people who chased us off the streets, to supporters of the project. We began to realise that people were seeing beyond the stereotypes. Then our ideas began to grow. "What do you really want?" we were asked. "Just a small ramp and possibly a bit of flat ground" came our now standard reply. "No, what would be the dream? No limits?" We spoke about places we had only seen in movies, of California, of purpose-built indoor skateparks and with encouragement and support, we started to work towards XSite.

We met with town and county councillors, development officers and a huge number of others. We met weekly, we filled in mountains of paperwork, we just kept going. We learnt

how to react professionally to criticism from those who were not so keen and learnt that, much like skateboarding itself, there was a lot of pain in the process, but when you finally succeed, all the pain seems worth it.

The day Sport England accepted the proposal was the moment we knew our wildest dreams would become reality. We, a group of skate rats, suddenly had a million pounds to put Skegness on the Extreme Sports map and create the first purpose-built indoor and outdoor skatepark in the UK.

Our hard work felt like a Hollywood teen movie, where the losers came out on top and proved themselves worthy of the town's respect.

The people who did this were not the smart kids. Our teachers would never have picked us to run a million-pound project. We were just a bunch of skate rats who wouldn't take no for an answer. This building is a testament to the power of young people. When you look at this building, you are looking at young people with a dream and a determination to make it happen.

Some of the original group have moved on. Some have stayed. Bodies don't handle the falls like they used to and many are not taking themselves to the skatepark, but their children instead.

Skegness will never be California, but XSite Skatepark will always be a little slice of the Californian dream.