

Kirkby Stephen – How we became accredited

Kirkby Stephen has a population of approximately 1,800 and a hinterland of Upper Eden, 17 parishes totalling 5,000 residents. We are at the centre of Wainwright's Coast to Coast as well as other long distance trails with loads of walking countryside on the Westmorland Pennines and Open Access moors, Howgills and lower level valley walking nearby. We have always had increasing amounts of walking visitors but we were attracted to Walkers are Welcome accreditation as a way of advertising that we really did welcome walkers and we wanted to improve that experience. Walkers had in the past had a bad press for contributing very little to the local economy; we wanted to change that image as well.

The Town Council were approached for support and they officially endorsed the action. An exhibition organised in conjunction with the Charter Fair where we showcased local walking facilities eg. baggage transport, clothing, walk leaflets, accommodation and tour guides with the main aim to launch the idea and collect signatures of support. The weather was appalling but there was great enthusiasm. Signatures were also collected at the local newsagents.

A steering group of people that would be useful was brought together. County Council - the Countryside Access Ranger, District Council – the Tourism and Economy Portfolio officer, a Kirkby Stephen Mountain Rescue volunteer, a Town Councillor, the Community Plan Project Officer, a local Wildlife Trust volunteer officer, a retired Countryside project manager and me, Town Forum Publicity Officer and general all round volunteer. The majority live in the town. In our area most people walk, from taking the dog a mile a day to climbing Nine Standards and higher peaks and very serious fell runners and mountain rescue volunteers but we don't have any walking groups, not even the Ramblers Association. The most serious walkers spend their spare time walking not improving facilities and sitting on committees. We have changed a couple of faces and added two new members from the accommodation sector.

We already had in place walk leaflets and promoting walking in the Tourist Information Centre but we were concerned to do something special about Rights of Way monitoring. We produced a postcard reporting system where walkers could report any problems that they come across. The report goes via the Council and Community Centre, is reported to the County Council and we monitor problems and progress discussing with the Countryside Access Ranger. The District Council paid for the printing. This is also now available on line <http://www.walkeden.org/Walking/Report-a-problem.aspx>

We surveyed every inch of our Rights of Way within the township boundary plus a few in nearby parishes and recorded maintenance needed and long term improvements required. Three years on, the last of these is being dealt with but there is always the need for cutting back bramble bushes and nettles every summer or clearing litter that has blown in during the winter. Whilst we consider ourselves responsible for monitoring Rights of Way in this township, we do report and discuss problems in the nearby vicinity and encourage action where needed.

We have a limited public transport system with two bus routes and the Settle to Carlisle train station. We worked with the new caretakers at the station and they opened a cafe for walkers, sadly they have left and the station is holiday accommodation serving tourism in a different way. We continue to put our nose in about public transport issues, eg. Lately one of the buses has been running late and missing the train connection so we have raised our concerns with the County Council.

We believed that we met the criteria and completed our application. The Town Council paid the membership fee. We were delighted to be accredited with kind words from Andrew Bibby about the quality of our application.

There was a very low key launch as part of a celebration for 21 years at the Tourist Information Centre complete with WaW network banner and compulsory press.

A new website has been produced by one of our group which is updated and has grown with new pages being added as needed, we are proud of it <http://www.walkeden.org/>. We do a little Twitter. We work with all tourism and anything walk or countryside related including improving access for all and send a quarterly newsletter to accommodation providers. We try to take advantage of every opportunity to publicise our area.

We have made a conscious decision not to have a Walking Festival. Kirkby Stephen was one of the first towns to hold Walking Festivals some considerable number of years ago. This filled accommodation for a week but meant that there was a colossal burden on volunteers who gave up, burnt out. We prefer to encourage walking all year and reduce the workload to manageable levels leaving us free to tackle innovation.

The steering group has recently decided to formalise with a constitution and committee to make us independent and able to seek funding for new projects. In the past we have encouraged other organisations to fund what we believed needed doing.

I am very aware that each town and village has different reasons for joining Walkers are Welcome, wishes to achieve totally diverse objectives to meet their local needs but it is always inspirational to come together to share ideas and general encouragement to further the aims.

Ann Sandell - Kirkby Stephen