

# WELCOME WAVE

Just 18 months after the Walkers are Welcome initiative was launched in Hebden Bridge, towns and villages across Britain are queuing up to join. In the run-up to its second national conference next month, David Foster asks if the scheme is making a difference.

**J**ohn Woolmer is a man with a mission. “When we first came to live in Shropshire,” he recalls, “I regularly drove down the A49 through a pall of smoke from burning cattle and sheep drifting across the road. The foot and mouth epidemic devastated our area because we’re very dependent on tourism. Church Stretton was on its knees, and I just wondered what I could do as an individual.”

What John did was to organise the town’s first annual walking festival in 2003, in conjunction with their Food Fayre and Ale Trail – all of which are still running successfully. But he didn’t leave it there. Last year, John’s interest in walking led him and two colleagues to the first Walkers are Welcome national conference in Hebden Bridge.

The little group came back “totally enthused by the idea”. Less than seven months later, Church Stretton was celebrating the launch of its new status as a Walkers are Welcome town – and John is now a member of the Walkers are Welcome national committee.

“It was just lovely to get off the train at Church Stretton,” says Ramblers chairman Kate Ashbrook, who cut the tape at the launch ceremony. “Immediately, the school band was playing and there were loads of people there to welcome me. They were really excited.”

Kate believes that the Walkers are Welcome initiative is an important ally for the Ramblers. “It gets the paths in the locality opened up,” she says. “The local authority might not get around to it, but local people are out there doing the waymarking, or replacing stiles with gates. So you’re getting a much greater resource into the rights of way network, as well as showing why it’s important to the local economy.”

## INCREASING TRADE

And that’s the sub-text for Walkers are Welcome in places as far apart as Shropshire and Kilsyth, just off the Forth and Clyde Canal in Lanarkshire. There, local Ramblers group chairman James Hunt sees the advantages for both walkers and local traders. “About 250,000 people use the canal towpath every year,” he says. “If we could divert even a quarter of them into Kilsyth ... that would be a major achievement.”

Kilsyth Walkers are Welcome group works closely with the Kelvin Valley Countryside Park to promote the local path network. “The place is oozing with historical interest,” says James, reeling off a list that includes the canal itself and the newly-designated Roman Antonine Wall World Heritage Site. There’s also a good train service to nearby Croy station, underpinning >>



Paul Houghton

**Main image:** Walkers on Prestatyn Hillside overlooking the North Wales town. **Right:** View of the Moffat Hills in Dumfries and Galloway. **Middle left:** Kate Ashbrook launching WaW at Church Stretton (below left).



## SIX STEPS TO ENROL



Walkers are Welcome is a flexible, community-based initiative, founded in the Yorkshire town of Hebden Bridge in February 2007. Inspired by the Fairtrade Towns movement, Walkers are

Welcome aims to improve conditions for walkers and demonstrate how recreational visits help to support the local economy. The scheme is independent of the Ramblers' Association – though it may be no coincidence that Ramblers' trustee Andrew Bibby (pictured above) was one of those involved in setting it up.

"We thought that there were various things we could do locally to improve conditions for walkers in Hebden Bridge," says Andrew. "But even at the beginning we could see the national potential. We didn't want this to be just a marketing initiative with nothing behind it, so we created six hoops for ourselves and then jumped through them!"

Other towns and villages soon signed up to the initiative. But, to win formal accreditation, all must complete those same six steps, designed to ensure local support and a secure future for each project:

1. Communities must demonstrate **popular support**, for instance by organising a petition.
2. The local council must **formally endorse** the scheme and allocate a small budget for it.
3. Rights of way must be **actively maintained**, walked regularly, and kept clear of obstructions.
4. Leaflets, signs and waymarked walks can all form part of a thorough **marketing plan**.
5. Clear advice on **public transport** will encourage walkers to leave the car at home.
6. A properly established **steering group** will maintain Walkers are Welcome status.

*For information about how your own community can join the Walkers are Welcome towns network, visit [www.walkersarewelcome.org.uk](http://www.walkersarewelcome.org.uk).*



Alan Devlin

## “THE MAIN FOCUS IS ON IMPROVING AND PUBLICISING LOCAL RIGHTS OF WAY – BUT EVERYONE POINTS OUT THE CLEAR ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF ATTRACTING MORE WALKERS TO RURAL AREAS.”

the Walkers are Welcome objective to encourage travel by public transport.

Further south, in Dumfries and Galloway, the Moffat and District Community Initiative (MDCI) has been promoting sustainable economic initiatives for the last 10 years. Tourism is high on MDCI's agenda, and next month the group will stage Moffat's eighth annual walking festival.

“Our walking credentials are very important to us,” says MDCI's Chairman, Geoff Kitt. “When the possibility of joining Walkers are Welcome came along, we were very interested.” His team moved quickly, so that when Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland David Mundell MP presented Geoff with Walkers are Welcome accreditation last April, Moffat became the first Scottish town to receive it.

Walkers can now choose from a range of 25 waymarked routes in and around Moffat: details are posted on the MDCI website, and leaflets are on sale in the town. But Geoff still sees the need for improvements, saying: “We really need to work more closely with the council's access people – and the officer for our area was only appointed last week, after a gap of several years!”

### ATTRACTING VISITORS

It's a different story in North Wales, where the community council itself

### WHERE YOU'RE WELCOME

The Walkers are Welcome Towns Network is growing fast. By the time you read this, nine towns across mainland Britain will have qualified for accreditation:

**Hebden Bridge** (West Yorkshire)

**Moffat** (Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland)

**Prestatyn & Meliden** (Denbighshire, North Wales)

**Mytholmroyd** (West Yorkshire)

**Church Stretton** (Shropshire)

**Market Weighton** (East Yorkshire)

**Kilsyth** (Lanarkshire, Scotland)

**Pentrefoelas** (Conwy, North Wales)

**Bishop's Castle** (Shropshire)

**Great Malvern** (Worcestershire), **Penmaenmawr** (Conwy, North Wales), and **Otley** (West Yorkshire) are all scheduled to join the network later this month, while a further six communities are actively working towards membership.



www.britainonview.com

has spearheaded Walkers are Welcome status for Pentrefoelas. Despite its spectacular local scenery, many walkers rush through the village on the A5, heading for nearby Snowdonia.

“We knew that there were numerous circular footpaths that begin and end from the car park in the centre of the village, where there's a shop, a pub, a café and public toilets,” says the council's clerk, Hâf Williams. “So we got together and put up a panel of five circular walks.”

Initially, the project was funded with an Active Lifestyles grant from the Sports Council for Wales. Later, when Hâf found out about Walkers are Welcome, the project moved up a gear. “We wanted to make things enjoyable for residents and visitors alike,” she says. “Conwy Council Countryside Service has been great. With their aid we've been able to waymark many miles correctly, and make it easier for people to walk.”


Nevertheless, just as elsewhere, there's a sub-text here in Wales. The main focus is naturally on improving and publicising local rights of way – but everyone points out the clear economic benefits of attracting more walkers to rural areas.

“We've noticed a definite increase in the volume of walkers in the area,” says Hâf. “It's the local businesses >>

The canal basin at Auchinstarry off the Forth & Clyde Canal, near Kilsyth.



Graeme Bird



**"ANY AREA THAT HAS WALKING COUNTRYSIDE COULD AND SHOULD TIE UP WITH WALKERS ARE WELCOME. IT'S ACHIEVABLE. IT'S WORTHWHILE. AND IT'S DAMN GOOD FUN!"**

Signage for the Offa's Dyke Path on Central Beach, Prestatyn, in North Wales.

© Crown Copyright (2008) Visit Wales

who are telling us – the post office, the shop and the café – that things like this do help them. It's definitely made a difference here."

### **MORE EVIDENCE NEEDED**

While that's encouraging news, Hâf's comment is typically imprecise. Despite the intense competition for grant funding, Walkers are Welcome communities seem to have made little attempt to quantify the increase in visitors and their effect on the local economy. In the same way, feedback from walkers themselves is in short supply; the evidence so far, whether from Tourist Information Centres, local businesses or simple observation, is largely anecdotal.

And yet there is one dramatic piece of hard evidence, close to the northern end of Offa's Dyke National Trail. The town of Prestatyn won Walkers are Welcome accreditation soon after its 2007 annual walking festival and, since then, festival planning meetings have been held jointly with Walkers are Welcome.

"There's a clear synergy between the two

initiatives," says Malcolm Wilkinson, who chairs the Walkers are Welcome Towns Network, "and bookings for this year's festival were up by just over 30 per cent!"

It's an impressive achievement, and figures like that could raise the Walkers are Welcome profile with local authorities and grant-making trusts. "It's jolly difficult, but I hope they might do some kind of economic survey to show whether the community benefits," says Kate Ashbrook. "That would be wonderful. Perhaps someone might do a PhD on it, or one of the universities might be interested."

It may be churlish to pick holes in an initiative that has achieved so much in such a short time, but Walkers are Welcome has also made little headway in southern England. "Maybe the south just doesn't feel a need to encourage people to visit," says Kate Ashbrook, "but there are lots of really go-ahead communities that

actually would benefit enormously." Little-known areas like the Vale of Aylesbury, she suggests, offers glorious walking countryside; or places like Hanslope, near Milton Keynes, with more than a hundred paths in the parish.

Back in Church Stretton, perhaps John Woolmer could inspire them. "Anyone can do this," he says. "Provided you've got huge enthusiasm and real commitment, almost any area that has walking countryside could and should tie up with Walkers are Welcome. It's achievable. It's worthwhile. And it's damn good fun!" ■

*The second Walkers are Welcome national conference is held in Prestatyn on 26 October and is open to anyone interested in joining the scheme. Visit [www.walkersarewelcome.org.uk](http://www.walkersarewelcome.org.uk) for more details.*

**So they talk the talk, but do they walk the walk? Andrew McCloy and Dominic Bates visited the first Walkers are Welcome towns in England, Wales and Scotland to find out just how welcoming they really are...**



CASE STUDY • CASE STUDY • CASE STUDY • CASE STUDY • CASE STUDY

Images: Britainonview/Andy Stothert, John Morrison/True North

# ENGLAND

## HEBDEN BRIDGE

Hebden Bridge is a former Pennine mill town, squeezing a 4,500 population into the leafy Calder Valley and surrounded by high pasture and moors.

**DID YOU KNOW?** Hebden Bridge was voted the 'fourth funkier town in the world' by BA's inflight magazine, *Highlife*.

### 1 WALKERS ARE WELCOME TOWN SINCE? 18 February 2007.

**2 NUMBER OF WAYMARKED ROUTES FROM TOWN?** Six newly created by Hebden Bridge and Mytholmroyd Walkers' Action groups with leaflet guides to two others (Cragg Vale and Eaves Wood). Their 'Gentle Walking' initiative has plotted four easy routes on the level.

**3 OTHER WALKING OPPORTUNITIES?** It's a splendidly diverse landscape: from the towpath of the Rochdale Canal to former packhorse routes winding steeply up to surrounding hamlets, then on to open moors – most of it access land. Eight local walking clubs put on regular walks in the area and there's September's annual South Pennines Walk and Ride Festival.

**4 CELEBRATED ROUTES NEARBY?** Hebden Bridge is on the circular Calderdale Way, the Pennine Way is a mile away via the Rochdale Canal towpath, and the Mary Towneley Loop links the town to the Pennine Bridleway.

**5 PUBLIC TRANSPORT TO/FROM WALKS?** Frequent daily trains from Leeds, Manchester, Rochdale, Burnley and Preston, plus buses from Halifax, Burnley, Keighley and Rochdale.



### THEY SAY...

"I envisage a network of Walkers are Welcome towns throughout the South Pennines. What Hebden Bridge is doing is fantastically inspirational."  
**Pam Warhurst,**  
Natural England

### WE SAY...

Amid the lure of the arty shops and restaurants, walking fits comfortably in the wider visitor package. Better still, the energetic Walkers Action groups are encouraging locals to use their footpaths and working with the authorities to improve the network for everyone's benefit.

### FURTHER INFO

[www.hbwalkersaction.org.uk](http://www.hbwalkersaction.org.uk)  
[www.hebdenbridge.co.uk](http://www.hebdenbridge.co.uk)

**WELCOME RATING:** 8/10

### 6 INFORMATION AND SIGNAGE?

Prominent information boards in the town centre and at the rail station show the new waymarked routes. Detailed walkers' information, including maps and publications, is available from the Hebden Bridge Visitor and Canal Centre at Butlers Wharf, New Road (open daily).

### 7 OUTDOORS EQUIPMENT SHOPS?

Mountain-Wild is on Crown Street.

### 8 LOCAL AMENITIES AND FACILITIES?

Since arty types moved here in the 70s and 80s, the town centre is now awash with trendy little shops, cafés, bistros and boutiques. Walkers are Welcome stickers abound: on Bridge Gate check out the Watergate Tearooms, William Holt deli and the Pennine Wine & Cheese Company. For evening culture, visit the Picture House or Little Theatre.



### 9 MUST SEE?

Hardcastle Crag is a glorious, 400-acre woodland with dramatic ravines, tumbling streams, and some well-preserved upland meadows. An easy waymarked route from the town centre takes you there.

### 10 RECOMMENDED WALK?

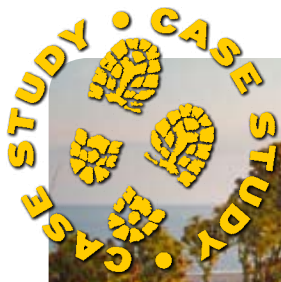
So many choices, but one walk offering terrific views over the valley is a 10km/6-mile circular up to Stoodley Pike, the huge memorial that stands on the edge of the moors south of the town. It begins at the railway station, then heads up paths and tracks on to the steep hillside. (Visit [www.hbwalkersaction.org.uk/walks.html](http://www.hbwalkersaction.org.uk/walks.html) for full details.)

### 11 WALKER-FRIENDLY PUBS?

The White Swan on Bridge Gate is good for food and ambience, while real ale connoisseurs will want to beat a path to the CAMRA award-winning Fox and Goose on Heptonstall Road.

### 12 WALKER-FRIENDLY ACCOMMODATION?

There's a reasonable range. For B&B, centrally-placed Holme House on New Road starts at £35pppn and offers packed lunches. There are quite a few self-catering and group options, including the YHA's Mankinholes hostel, a former 17th-century manor house on the moorland edge near Stoodley Pike.



Images: © Crown Copyright (2008) Visit Wales



Prestatyn (pop 18,500) is located on the North Wales coast, near the mouth of the Dee Estuary and famous for its smooth, sandy beaches. Nearby is the village of Meliden, at the foot of a low line of hills.

**DID YOU KNOW?** Four miles out to sea is North Hoyle, Britain's first offshore wind farm built in 2003.

**1 WALKERS ARE WELCOME TOWN SINCE?** 6 June 2007.

**2 NUMBER OF WAYMARKED ROUTES FROM TOWN?** There's the Prestatyn Town Trail and Meliden Village Trail, plus the Prestatyn to Dyserth Way, via Meliden, which follows the course of an old railway. Four new themed routes in Prestatyn are planned.

**3 OTHER WALKING OPPORTUNITIES?** The promenade and wide, sandy beaches offer easy walking; or follow the waymarked trail through Gronant Dunes. Inland, the town is overlooked by Prestatyn Hillside, a limestone ridge incorporating nature reserves and access land. Further south, the Clwydian Range AONB offers more challenging upland walking. The annual Prestatyn and District Festival of Walking takes place each May.

**4 CELEBRATED ROUTES NEARBY?** Prestatyn is the northern terminus of the Offa's Dyke Path National Trail, and the eastern end of the North Wales Path, plus it's on the newly-created Dee Way and is the start/finish of the Clwydian Way.

**5 PUBLIC TRANSPORT TO/FROM WALKS?** Prestatyn is on the mainline railway from



**THEY SAY...**

"Walkers are Welcome status has fired up people's interest and enthusiasm." **Malcolm Wilkinson, Prestatyn Walking Festival**

**WE SAY...**

At first glance this old-fashioned resort may seem down at heel. But regeneration is the local watchword and it's hugely encouraging to learn that walking is playing a part. In terms of location, access and countryside the town has a strong hand, but amenities need improving.

**FURTHER INFO**  
www.visitprestatyn.com



London to Holyhead, with a National Express connection and regular buses to Rhyl and Denbigh. The Clwydian Ranger bus service runs in summer.

**6 INFORMATION AND SIGNAGE?** Offa's Dyke Path signs abound, including new ones at the start/finish on Central Beach. Here you'll find the Tourist Information Centre, open at peak times only. If closed, try the library on Nant Hall Road or council offices opposite for walking guides.

**7 OUTDOORS EQUIPMENT SHOPS?** None. Head for Betws-y-Coed instead.

**8 LOCAL AMENITIES AND FACILITIES?** Most shops and cafés are located on Prestatyn's



High Street, which leads down to the touristy seafront. The Pendre Coffee Shop is the pick of the bunch, but there are several decent sandwich bars and delis. Expect this choice to widen, since the Scala Cinema and Arts Centre is being refurbished, and Tesco and Marks & Spencer are coming.

**9 MUST SEE?** Head for Prestatyn Hillside for tremendous views over the town.

**10 RECOMMENDED WALK?** There's a great 8km/5-mile circular walk heading out of the town along the crest of Prestatyn Hillside on the Offa's Dyke Path. Branch off to scale the panoramic summit of Graig Fawr, with magnificent views across the coastal plain to Rhyl and Snowdonia, then on to Dyserth Waterfall. Return on the Prestatyn-Dyserth Way. (View sections of the walk at [www.healthyprestatyn.org.uk/englishwalks](http://www.healthyprestatyn.org.uk/englishwalks).)

**11 WALKER-FRIENDLY PUBS?** Rather limited in Prestatyn – best is The Clwydian on the High Street. Instead head for Meliden where the Red Lion and Miners Arms are attractive village pubs, both Walkers are Welcome and renowned for good food and real ale.

**12 WALKER-FRIENDLY ACCOMMODATION?** Surprisingly few choices, perhaps because most visitors stay in holiday parks or caravans. B&B options range from £22.50pppn to £30pppn. The seafront Beaches Hotel welcomes walkers. For camping head to Nant Mill Caravan Park, two miles east.



Images: Visit Scotland/Scottish Viewpoint, Richard Clarkson



*Moffat is a picturesque former Victorian spa town in Dumfries and Galloway with a 2,500 population, in the green, rolling Moffat and Tweedsmuir hills.*

**DID YOU KNOW?** Moffat is home to the world's narrowest hotel: the Star Hotel on the High Street at only 6m/20ft wide. The town also hosts what is said to be Scotland's shortest street: Chapel Street.

## 1 WALKERS ARE WELCOME TOWN SINCE? 27 April 2008.

## 2 NUMBER OF WAYMARKED ROUTES FROM TOWN?

Ten, seven of which were created to coincide with the Walkers are Welcome launch. There is also a self-guided historic town tour following plaques.

## 3 OTHER WALKING OPPORTUNITIES?

Much of the surrounding countryside has freedom to roam with good, local short walks minutes from the town centre, such as Gallow Hill. Three Corbetts are also near. Moffat Ramblers helps organise the annual Moffat Walking Festival, now in its eighth year, on 3-5 October.

## 4 CELEBRATED ROUTES NEARBY?

The Southern Upland Way crosses 3km/2 miles away at Beattock, plus the Jubilee Path and Sir Walter Scott Way are nearby. The Annandale Way, along the River Annan, opens soon.

## 5 PUBLIC TRANSPORT TO/FROM WALKS?

There are regular, hourly buses to Glasgow, Edinburgh, Carlisle and Lockerbie (the nearest mainline rail station), and a National Express link.



### THEY SAY...

"We're called the jewel in the crown of Dumfries and Galloway for walking. Nobody can match us in the lowlands for sheer variety and accessibility of walks on offer."

**Jean Byers, Moffat TIC**

### WE SAY...

Moffat residents are positively embracing the new influx of walkers. It's no chocolate-box village because it's still a vibrant everyday community. Just off the M74, it's the perfect base for exploring the Scottish Borders (see p52).

### FURTHER INFO

[www.visitmoffat.co.uk](http://www.visitmoffat.co.uk)

**WELCOME RATING: 8/10**

## 6 INFORMATION AND SIGNAGE?

Information boards in the High Street show all local walking routes. Signposts to footpaths were not obvious when I visited in April, but new signage should now be in place. There is an excellent year-round Tourist Information Centre too.

## 7 OUTDOORS EQUIPMENT SHOPS?

None. Nearest is in Dumfries.

## 8 LOCAL AMENITIES AND FACILITIES?

On the High Street, there are numerous cafés, restaurants, a baker's and butcher's selling great fresh produce for packed lunches. A couple of theatres, a gallery and a bustling pub entertainment scene liven up the evenings, or try the Bridge House on Well Road for a hearty locally sourced dinner.

## 9 MUST SEE? The Moffat Toffee Shop on the High Street sells the town's famous sharp-tasting toffee and some excellent whiskies.

## 10 RECOMMENDED WALK?

The Grey Mare's Tail is a dramatic 4km/2.5-mile walk 16km/10 miles north-east of Moffat,



off the A708. The strenuous climb follows the spectacular 60m/200ft waterfall up the valley to its source at Loch of Skene. The moorland is protected by the National Trust and home to the greatest range of rare upland plants outside the Cairngorms. (Visit [www.nts.org.uk](http://www.nts.org.uk) for details.)

## 11 WALKER-FRIENDLY PUBS?

There are several decent pubs along the High Street – most attached to hotels sporting Walkers are Welcome accreditation. Tim Leighfield of the Star Hotel said: "Ramblers all enjoy the real ales and I've no problem with muddy boots!"

## 12 WALKER-FRIENDLY ACCOMMODATION?

Plentiful B&Bs, guesthouses and hotels, from £25-£70pppn, and all VisitScotland accredited. Ten are awarded Walkers are Welcome status (more are expected to join), and all are available for group bookings. Bunkhouses are being planned. A few do a pick up and luggage transfer service; otherwise Walking Support in Melrose can help (01896 822079, [www.walkingsupport.fsbusiness.co.uk](http://www.walkingsupport.fsbusiness.co.uk)).