

NORTHUMBERLAND NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

Annual Report 2004/05 - The Year in Brief

Introduction

It has been a good year for innovation and growth in Northumberland National Park. Following a culture change in 2003, the Authority has firmly embraced sustainable development and put the community and the local economy at the heart of everything we do. In Northumberland, this means encouraging people and communities to take the initiative in new enterprises and tourism facilities, supporting them as they get off the ground, then actively building the market of visitors to help them to thrive.

As Graham Taylor, OBE, comes to the end of his 15-year tenure as Chief Executive of the Authority, his vision and this new way of working is beginning to pay dividends with a wide array of National Park-supported community assets now up and running. It has been a useful discipline for us all to consider each project and grant in the light of multiple priorities – business, community, conservation, landscape and tourism - but it does indeed seem to work.

Key Achievements

National Award-winning Rural Regeneration

Falstone is one of the more remote communities in Northumberland National Park. When the Authority heard that its village shop and tearooms, located in the old school house, were to close and the building to be sold, it stepped into the breach and bought the premises.

Falstone Old School now functions successfully as a joint National Park visitor service and information point, a community shop, a tea room and a craft sales outlet which is run by a private enterprise in National Park premises. The local building company charged with transforming Falstone Tearooms used young, local talent to complete the job, and the business now employs local people.

Another important feature of the redeveloped building is its renewable energy systems – a biomass wood pellet burning stove and a photovoltaic roof, and the toilet facilities use grey water (collected rainwater) for flushing. These features are described in interpretation panels for visitor awareness and interest, and to inspire others to explore renewable energy possibilities.

The Authority and architects RMJM won the national Civic Trust Market Town Award for Falstone Tea Rooms in its former old school house. This is sponsored by the Countryside Agency to advocate the development of new buildings in the countryside that reconnect design and construction with the environment.

The Civic Trust described the Tea Rooms as: *'an excellent example of good conservation practice, yet with a high quality contemporary insertion, this sensitive renovation gives the historic building new life and dignity.'*

Hillfort Heritage - New Visitor Centre

In August 2004, the Duke of Northumberland officially opened the exhibition: *People of the Breamish Valley – A Decade of Discovery*, in Northumberland National Park Authority's newly-refurbished visitor centre at Ingram village in the Cheviot massif. The visitor centre houses a shop and light refreshments and provides information on the history and wildlife of the valley with suggested walks and cycle routes for a variety of abilities.

The new exhibition brought together the best of the finds made during ten years of excavations in the Breamish Valley - one of the best preserved yet least appreciated archaeological landscapes in Britain. It features a number of early Bronze Age pots, one of which includes the cremated remains of an infant who apparently died from meningitis four thousand years ago. The pots were found in two Bronze Age burial sites near Ingram. A special commemorative artwork inspired by the Breamish Valley, was made for the exhibition by local sculptor, Graham Taylor.

The exhibition is part of a project called *Discovering Our Hillfort Heritage*, which uses interpretation, walks and talks to engage people with the historical landscape and create an accessible visitor asset. The northern half of the National Park contains some of the most extensive and important prehistoric landscapes in Britain. The most visually impressive monuments within these landscapes are some fifty surviving iron-age hillforts, built by native communities in the centuries prior to the Roman invasion.

Rothbury Park House

As part of the Authority's search for community enterprise models that could be applied to Northumberland National Park, the 'Park House' concept is being explored.

As the population of the National Park is largely rural, with market towns around its edge, the Authority was keen to find a mechanism that ensured the initiative benefited both town *and* surrounding rural hinterland. An experimental Park House has now been started at Rothbury – one of the Northumberland National Park's gateway towns - with additional funding from ONE North East, the Countryside Agency and Northumberland Strategic Partnership. The building currently houses Park administration, a ranger base, an interactive Visitor Centre and the Tourist Office. A number of equipped office spaces and meeting rooms are also installed.

Park Houses have been successfully set up in National Parks in Europe with a similar rural environment and demographic to that of Northumberland. The concept is of a central building in a market town that both accommodates the park administration and also provides a resource for local businesses and the community. Under one roof, a range of expertise and advice is available, such as tourist information, local planning, business enterprise and farming.

Getting More People into the Park

The Max Card Scheme began in May 2002. It allows Looked After Children, children at risk, their carers and other family members free entry to over 50 museums, galleries and other heritage venues across the North East. For the first time some of the most disadvantaged families in the region were able to access cultural venues for no charge.

The scheme was very successful and other leisure activities and potentially excluded groups were included into the scheme. Northumberland, in particular, has made the card available to young offenders and children with disabilities.

From April 2005, as part of its Audience Development Initiative, Northumberland National Park Authority introduced the Max Card Scheme to both the its Great Days Out programme and to the Hadrian's Wall Bus Service which helps a whole range of people, often from the City, to get to and enjoy the region's *natural* heritage for the first time, as well as seeing the Hadrian's Wall World Heritage Site, and getting involved with activities. This was greatly facilitated by the support of the Hadrian's Wall Tourism Partnership.

Alongside this initiative, a series of nine, 2-5 mile, guided healthy walks has been started around National Park beauty spots which have suitable facilities. The *Walk in the Park* programme was conceived to bridge the gap between 1-2 mile town guided walks and the more rigorous routes for seasoned walkers in the deep countryside. Using trained health-walk guides, they are intended to build people's walking confidence and familiarise new and urban walkers with the solitude and tranquillity of the National Park.

On-Line On Target

Northumberland National Park Authority is making quantum leaps ahead with its on-line goals. A new website with on-line event booking and shop is shortly to be joined by a new Building Design Guide and fully on-line planning procedures.

The present Building Design Guide describes some of the key characteristics of traditional buildings within the National Park and provides useful information to help the farmer, householder or developer to design and build in a way which reflects the National Park's unique character. Current challenges include the provision of affordable housing for those who need to live and work in the National Park, increasing the energy efficiency of the housing stock, and redeveloping surplus buildings for conservation and economically-useful purposes. A thorough programme of public consultation has taken place during the past year and the first draft, due to be published, will be the first document in the Local Development Framework.

The new Design Guide will build on the existing document by adding sustainable development, biodiversity issues and innovative design.

People

The Historic Village Atlas

The Authority's on-line targets are increasingly focused on the services it can provide for the community. One of these is the culmination of a year-long project entitled The Historic Village Atlas.

This has involved communities from all over the National Park in compiling an 'Atlas', or survey, including maps, photographs and information about the history and archaeology of the villages. The results of this fascinating cultural survey have now been made available on-line for everyone to access. An unplanned but welcome outcome of the community research groups is that it has brought together many groups which now have new community plans of their own going on into the future.

The project, which was funded by Northumberland National Park Authority's Sustainable Development Fund and the Heritage Lottery Fund, also involved an oral history element, with people's memories of their villages being recorded for the benefit of present and future generations.

Big Volunteer Crew

An important campaign to engage people's pledge of time, work and specialist skills in aid of the National Park generated an unprecedented response this year: increasing the number of volunteer rangers by two hundred per cent.

Volunteers are a committed and invaluable resource, turning their hands to everything from path surveys to building habitats like otter holts and guiding walks to being information contact points at crowded events. At Northumberland National Park Authority, volunteer rangers go through a comprehensive training programme, are equipped with liveried kit, have a dedicated manager and elect their own chairman. As well as a wide range of skills on offer to the National Park including ecologists; engineers and archaeologists, there is also a wide age range: the eldest volunteer is 80 and the youngest just 16 years.

Partnerships

Relationships are Key to Smooth Open Access

Northumberland National Park includes many hectares of high hills, forest and moorland, much of it in large estates owned privately or by institutions such as the MOD and the Forestry Commission.

The Northumberland Local Access Forum was set up a year ahead of Open Access in May 2005, to advise Northumberland National Park Authority, Northumberland County Council and the Countryside Agency on how to make the countryside more accessible and enjoyable in ways which address social, economic and environmental interests.

Thanks to a good relationship with both the Forum, representing interested user groups, with local landowners, and with peers agencies the Northumberland National Park was well prepared for Open Access to begin. A great deal of planning and work was put into advising landowners, making paths and signage clear, and making information available on the National Park's website.

Farmers Adopt 'Old' Ways

Cattle droving was once a way of life in Northumberland but while the drove has been consigned to history, traditional farming methods are enjoying a revival.

The successful Northumberland National Park Authority Drovers' Project has seen the reintroduction of traditional breeds of cattle and grazing methods as part of conservation and enterprise initiatives within the National Park. Project officers have advised and encouraged farmers to experiment and then adopt 'old' ways - wintering cattle out while practising a modified form of transhumance to husband grasslands.

The high quality, grass-fed beef resulting from this practice has been shown to have a higher ratio of polyunsaturated to saturated fat and to be packed full of anti-oxidants. Altogether a healthier option with the bonus of fetching a higher price at retail.

Sustainable Development

Traditional Skills Award

The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has awarded a grant of £989,000 to enable the Northumberland National Park Authority to run a five-year traditional skills project to restore the traditional boundaries of the National Park.

The project will help reverse the declining number of skilled crafts people in the area to guarantee that these traditional boundaries are not lost forever. The National Park and its surroundings are in need of more people to help repair and conserve these significant features of the Northumberland National Park landscape.

The project will provide on-site and workshop training to equip 50 apprentices with the necessary skills to enable them to achieve certification in the management and repair of traditional boundaries from the Dry Stone Walling Association of Great Britain. The apprentices will also be taught hedge laying, path construction, erosion control, stiles and gates construction, planting of tree and shrubs, as well as identification of habitats and species. Another important element will be the provision of business development skills, to enable the development of new enterprises that will deliver National Park purposes.

In addition, to increase conservation skills among the local community 125 volunteers will be recruited and trained by the National Park Authority to work with communities to identify key traditional boundaries in need of conservation work. The apprentices will then work with both the volunteers and local people to restore

Sustainable Development is Renewable

Northumberland National Park Authority's Sustainable Development Fund has drawn down almost £3 million worth of match funding since it was introduced 18 months ago.

Renewable energy is an important factor in sustainability, and a number of experimental systems are in use in the Northumberland National Park as well as tried and tested ones. Falstone Tea Rooms has both a wood pellet-burning stove and also a photovoltaic roof contributing to its energy input. These do not need bright sunshine as some people believe but just daylight. In summer, the North has more daylight hours making them very effective. The Authority's SDF has also supported the installation of solar panels at Ninebanks YHA and Rothbury Jubilee Hall.

Another form of renewable energy is geothermal. That is, taking the natural heat of the Earth and converting it into electricity. Two projects use different methods to tap into geothermal energy.

Norwegian Wood

A Norwegian-style timber self-catering hotel for disabled people, with a grass roof that moulds into the landscape, and complete with jacuzzi and sauna heated by geothermal energy, will be opening in Northumberland for the 2006 holiday season.

This recently-funded new project is the vision of midwife, Sonja Gregory and her husband, Simon – a former shepherd turned builder, who have designed the perfect, secluded, self-catering chalet, with luxurious but practical comfort specifically for disabled people with or without carers.

The whole building and all facilities will derive heat from the Earth using a geothermal coil and heat exchanger. The turf roof – using sods laid on their sides to create a 5” layer only need strimming for the first couple of years until the fertility of the soil is reduced, then they are relatively maintenance free and very attractive.

The new tourist facility will be completed by the end of the year in time for the 2006 season. When it's all up and running, it is planned to organise bus tours to Hadrian's Wall and appropriate sites around the county.

Deep Well on The Wall

The Old Repeater Station Hostel and licensed Café on the Military Road at Grindon provides simple but stylish accommodation geared to walkers and cyclists, and delicious catering. Heating and lashings of hot water are provided using geothermal energy from a 300 foot borehole. This is also the source of the hostel's crystal clear drinking water which takes 100 years to filter through the Whin Sill to the reservoir deep down.