



Local people in Kirkby Stephen have developed a walking map of 60 benches in and around Kirkby Stephen. Six of the benches have been designated as 'Happy to Chat' benches. The map provides ideas for interesting town walks as well as scenic riverside and viaduct walks. It gives people the confidence of knowing where their next bench is, as well as the opportunity to meet others.

## Background

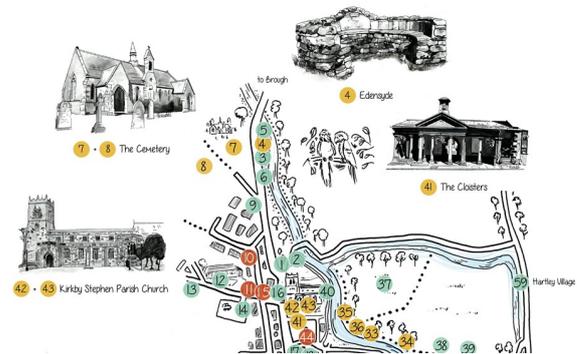
In November 2019, the Chair of Cumbria Westmorland Federation of Women's Institutes (WI) gave members a challenge - to do something that would have an impact on their community and help to combat loneliness. This led to the development of the Bench Walks map.

Cumbria County Council (CCC) had previously organized a Dementia Awareness Day in Kirkby Stephen. The groups involved in the awareness day became the partners for the Bench Walk project. Anne Cradock, Activity Coordinator of Nateby & Wharton WI, organised the meetings at the Bothy Café in Kirkby Stephen, and a plan was formulated to firstly find and then create a map of the benches around the town and adjacent area.

In February 2020, Ann Sandell and Kirkby Stephen & District Walkers are Welcome members arranged three exploratory walks together with the partners and members of the WI. They were surprised to find over 80 benches, rather than the 20 or 30 they had expected.

## The Project

The aim was to enable less mobile people in the community to enjoy the benefits of short accessible walks. To this end, the map was produced. There is no set route; just a map demarking all of the accessible benches. This gives residents and visitors the flexibility to plan walks with a difference, from bench to bench; whether it's a 10-minute stroll or a 5-mile round trip. The Happy to Chat benches give people the opportunity to meet others.



*Kirkby Stephen Bench Walks map*

The project leaders came from the local WI and Walkers are Welcome, and support came from various sources, for instance Ann Sandell voluntarily drew the map and illustrated it with 6 well known sites around the town, and created the design for the 'Happy to Chat' plaque. The Town Council arranged for any damaged benches to be refurbished. Partners also included Kellie Bradburn-Sims, CCC's Eden Development Officer; Kate Lynch, Kirkby Stephen Community Arts; and Nicola Estill, Westmorland Dales Landscape Partnership.

The outbreak of Covid-19 meant that the August 2020 launch was scaled down, however a celebration event planned for 26<sup>th</sup> June 2021 (which is to become an annual event) will have story tellers on the Happy to Chat benches, and musicians, artists and dancers at places illustrated on the map, providing entertainment as people walk and have their picnic along the routes.



*Sarah Middleton (Nateby & Wharton WI President) Ann Sandell, Cllr Phil Dew, Anne Cradock & Joan Johnstone (Town Council Chair) presenting a framed map to Julie Barton (High Sheriff) at the launch, 3 August 2020*



*One of 6 Happy to Chat benches in Kirkby Stephen*

## What has been achieved?

Since the onset of Covid-19, the benefits of daily exercise and social interaction, particularly outdoors, are clearer than ever. The Bench Walks Project encourages people to do both; to exercise in the fresh air and to socialise if they wish to. Feedback has been very positive from residents and visitors alike. One couple said that the best day of their holiday was doing the Bench Walk.

The maps are available from Kirkby Stephen's Visitor Centre and have been distributed, along with framed copies, to the local care homes and health centre. BBC Radio Cumbria posted a video on their Facebook page of an interview about the Happy to Chat Benches and the group has a Facebook site where people are invited to post selfies of themselves on the benches or views from them.

Many of the benches are dedicated to individuals and has inspired the history society to research the people behind the dedications.

## The Learning

Eight months of meetings, planning, recording and partnership working, positivity and determination have been the key to the success of this project. Covid-19 and lockdown struck during the final months of planning but this didn't deter the team and in August 2020 there was a successful launch by the High Sheriff, Julie Barton.

Prior to lockdown, their meetings were held at a welcoming local café, enabling the group to avoid room hire costs, and thanks to the generosity of those involved, the only funding required was for printing the maps and producing the Happy to Chat plaques (mounted by Kirkby Stephen Town Council). However, funds will be required for 2021's Bench Walk Celebration Event.

The High Sheriff said at the launch "The theme for my year as High Sheriff is to tackle social isolation and loneliness and this project will do just that. I admire everyone's resilience and 'can-do' mentality to not put off the launch until next year. Congratulations on achieving something so special in a year that has been so challenging."

**For more information** please contact Anne Cradock, WI: [Anne.cradock@btinternet.com](mailto:Anne.cradock@btinternet.com) or Ann Sandell, Kirkby Stephen & District Walkers are Welcome: [www.walkeden.org](http://www.walkeden.org)

## ACT champions community and rural issues

ACTION with Communities in Cumbria, Offices O - Q Skirsgill Business Park, Penrith, Cumbria CA11 0FA  
T: 01768 425666 | [www.cumbriaaction.org.uk](http://www.cumbriaaction.org.uk) | [info@cumbriaaction.org.uk](mailto:info@cumbriaaction.org.uk) | Follow us @ACTCumbria and on Facebook  
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