

Kington Walks AGM
5th December 2023
Chair's Report on 2023 by Sarah Lee

Walking Festivals

Both the spring and autumn walking festivals were well supported. Most walks sold well and very few had to be cancelled. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Evening events were also well supported, especially the quiz at the spring festival and the band at the autumn festival. The big improvement in participation in the photography competition that we saw in 2021 and 2022 was maintained in 2023. We continue to be very appreciative of the crucial contribution made by our walk leaders. As some of our longstanding walk leaders step down, we recognise the importance of recruiting new walk leaders.

Our thanks go to all our walk leaders, and to our Festival Organiser, Nigel Sheath.

Website, Marketing and Sponsorship

The new Kington Walks website was launched early in 2023, in time for the Spring Walking Festival and the brochure was discontinued. As well as carrying all the information and the means of booking for the walking festivals, the website features pages for the photography competition, Kington Walking for Health, Footpaths around Kington, and information and links relating to the town.

Our move away from the brochure and our re-development of the website are closely connected to developments in the way we approach advertising, sponsorship, and marketing. We previously sold advertising space both on the website and in the brochure. We now have a cleaner, more functional website. Advertising has been replaced by a walk sponsorship scheme which ran for the first time in the September festival. All 29 walks were sponsored for a fee of £25, for the most part by local businesses. As well as supporting the festival financially, walk sponsorship strengthens our local partnerships and gives sponsors the opportunity to publicise and get involved with their particular walk. We recognise that there is scope for us to develop these links further and do more to enable sponsors to become involved. The photography competition prize was sponsored by Paramo, and the Casserole Evening by Tarmac.

Marketing analysis based on information provided by online bookings for the autumn 2023 festival shows that 44% of bookings were return visits by previous festivalgoers; 17% resulted from word of mouth and 16% from social media. 10% of bookings resulted from other publicity generated by Kington Walks eg magazine advertising and posters (the remainder accounted for by 'other' or internet search). From this, we can see that social media is playing an increasingly significant part in our marketing, accounting for more bookings and income than all of our paid advertising put together. This analysis will be helpful in informing our future marketing strategy.

Our thanks go to our new website manager, Andy Lauder, to Bob North for all the work involved in the website handover, and to Helen Lauder, who runs our social media and our overall marketing.

Footpath Maintenance

The footpath maintenance team has had another busy year. As well as carrying out regular maintenance days, the team has continued to liaise with the Ramblers over maintenance of the Mortimer Trail. Colour-coded way marker signs have been obtained for the signposting of the Six Great Walks around Kington, featured on the new website and the Kington Town Map, in line with our plans to promote further the Six Great Walks, and hence local walking, in 2024. Most recently, on the Mortimer Trail, the team has been trained to install metal kissing gates. This will enable us, where possible and by agreement with landowners, to replace worn-out stiles with more access-friendly kissing gates.

Kevin Robinson has continued in his role as Footpath Officer. Our system to allow walkers to report any faults directly through footpaths@kingtonwalks.org, has been used regularly, either directly or via the Kington Tourist information Centre. All issues have been followed up, where possible directly by Kevin and the footpath team, or where appropriate referred to Hereford County Council, and then monitored by Kevin.

Walking for Health

We are very pleased to report that the Kington Walking for Health scheme has now been running for just over a year. It has been well supported by volunteer walk leaders and backmarkers, and greatly appreciated by participants. Individual feedback emphasises the benefits of the scheme to mental as well as physical health, for example to participants who had rarely left their own homes since the pandemic.

In addition to the weekly short walk on the Kington Recreation Ground, there is now an emerging need for a regular longer walk. This will require additional support by way of leaders and backmarkers. The scheme will take a short break during the winter months, and return in the spring, when it is hoped we will be able to offer two grades of walk, as above.

We were fortunate enough to be selected as a chosen charity for our locality by the Co-Op community charity scheme. We received a generous charitable grant of £4,583 in November 2023. This will be of great assistance in maintaining and expanding the scheme.

Role Changes

2023 has seen a number of role changes:

- Nigel Sheath has stood down as a trustee and as Chair of Trustees. He has also indicated that he will step down as Festival Organiser

- Sarah Lee has become Chair of Trustees
- Paul Finch has become a trustee.
- Adrian Wilcox has stood down as treasurer and will be replaced in the role by Paul Finch
- Rebecca Ellsmore has joined Kington Walks as our new Festival Organiser
- Bob North has stood down as Website Manager and will be standing down from Kington Walks as of December 2023
- Andy Lauder has taken on the role of Website Manager
- Helen Lauder has stepped down from her role as minute-taker, and Julia Bluett has joined Kington Walks as our new minute-taker

My thanks go to all who have carried out these roles with dedication and diligence, and contributed to Kington Walks becoming the successful organisation that it is today. We continue to depend on the willingness of our committee of volunteers to support each other and to take our turn by stepping up, either into existing roles, or where a new opportunity to contribute emerges. I am extremely grateful to all of you for your commitment and generosity.