

## **Northamptonshire Walks: A look back at 2021**

Well...what an unprecedented year it's been throughout the world & in the world of Northamptonshire Walks. We began 2021 in another lockdown, where we were unable to meet our loved ones & one of the few things we could do was go for a walk, although initially this was only from our own "doorstep".

That period of the year was when peoples' mental health came to the forefront (& remains there today). It was also a time when we began seeing huge numbers of local people joining the Facebook Group & the nature of it changing from a pure walking group to a sense of a community, a support network & somewhere people could just be nice to each other. We all had something in common & that sense of belonging & friendliness remains today, & long may it do so.

Throughout the year I received many private messages from people telling me their very personal stories of how the walks & this group had been a source of help during their own struggles. It's very humbling to receive these.

Not only were we walking, we had to find ways of keeping going when the mud was too deep. So we set up challenges such as draw a picture with your walking map app; find interesting trees (who can forget the No No tree in Abington Park); take shadow pictures; pictures of different shapes; spot the first signs of spring etc. Again, these were a great way of keeping spirits high. We also had a Friday Night Quiz

## **Growth of the Group through 2021**

The growth of Northamptonshire Walks has been astonishing. There are now almost 28,000 of you in the Facebook Group. We work hard to ensure we block all spammers & advertising etc to keep it a positive & supportive page. In 2020 my website got 519,000 views. Today in 2021, we are just a few views short of 1 million.

## **Our Team**

I remember back in April 2021 Mrs A (aka Admin) turned to me & said "You're spending 24 on this. How can we ever take a break?" So we approached some members who thought might have the same values as us to see if they would volunteer to help with the day to day running of the group. Step forward Carol Poole, Sarah Merk, Elaine Pearson &, for a time Tina Weaving. I cannot thank them enough & value their help on the admin side.

Our other unsung hero is the quiet, unassuming Richard Parkes, who has his own personal Covid stories to tell yet, throughout all of this & a devastating factory fire, has continued to freely give his time & energy to supply all of the hoodies, polos & fleeces free of charge. Oh...& don't forget the Northamptonshire Walks flag!! If ever there's an award for resilience then Richard truly deserves it.

## **Group Walks**

After lockdown had eased the message was reaching me that many of you wanted to walk, but you preferred to do so in company & also in a safe environment. Keeping you all safe is & will remain one of our biggest priorities. I remember saying to Admin "I wonder if we could do a couple of Group Walks?" Never in my wildest dreams did I think there would be such a demand & I could literally fill every day of the month. Since those three walks in May, over 1200 people have come on a Group Walk. I'm sorry that you haven't all been able to grab a place, but we do try & offer a fair a booking system as possible. We look forward to seeing lots more of you next year.

The demand of course threw up its own issues – everything I do is fitted around our personal lives & this was something else that I needed help with. I first met Elaine Pearson when I delivered a hoodie to her at the start of the year & remember saying "If ever I start doing Group Walks, I think you'd be great at helping me them." Of course she didn't believe me, but look now & I know you all love her & the way she looks after each & every one of you. She gets all embarrassed when I thank her...but thank you Elaine.

One of my happiest memories of the year was at the pre Xmas Hat mass walk around Pitsford Reservoir. We all set off & Elaine had gone ahead to take a picture. She said to me "Just look behind you." To see the sheer number of happy, smiling faces was pure joy.

## **'In the Media'**

Lots of my time has been taken up in many different ways throughout the year & I try to be as available as possible & am honoured to be asked. This year my media time has included:

TV & Radio: BBC & ITV appearances; BBC Northampton radio – they have been so supportive

Speaking events: The Moulton Literary Festival; the Jeyes Moongate Garden Festival; various local organisations including Rotary Clubs & WI meetings

Writing articles: regular monthly articles for several magazines, the local papers plus the Daily Telegraph

Charity Calendar: You asked for it & we produced it with the generous, free help of so many people. We still have lots left & will keep them available until the end of January.

## **Recognition**

We were lucky to receive several awards during 2021 for our efforts in helping people during these difficult times. Both local MPs sent personal letters of thanks & we have an invitation to visit Parliament when this is possible. We won the Taylor Wimpey Award for what the group had done & were a finalist in two other awards. The one I loved was getting a massive "thank you" on the big screen at the Uni – not that I sat in the car for three hours watching it come round every 20 minutes!

Whilst it's lovely & humbling to receive these, for me it proves that the community (including all of you) we've all built is such a special place.

## **My funniest moment of the year**

Oh there's been so many & so much laughter, especially on the Group Walks. I love telling you lots of stories, but of course it's up to you to decide whether they're all true!

One of the best moments came a few weeks ago, when Elaine & I were taking a ladies welfare group on wet & cold Sunday morning walk around the Northampton Shoe Quarter. We'd almost finished & were waiting for the lights to change to cross the road. I started talking to the lady next to me, telling her more about the walk & asking what her favourites were. We then continued for a few hundred yards, still chatting until she finally said "I have to go now. Thank you for all the information but I'm not part of your walking group. I was just crossing the road!"

I think we'll do a thread on this & get you share yours.

## **And finally...to the most important people that make everything what it is – ALL OF YOU**

You all have made this group possible & without you it wouldn't exist. The stories you tell, the amazing pictures you share, the personal support you give to each other & to me as well. We are a very large group, but your enthusiasm & determination to keep the happy, positive & safe environment it operates within makes it a joy to moderate & I know the other guys would say the same.

Lots of you have undertaken personal challenges throughout 2021 & we've been proud to support you. Many have these have included walking a number of steps. Who can forget the morning at Upton Country Park when lots of us turned out to support Diane Gosling completing her challenge & raise money for the Lewis Foundation.

I know they'll be many more in 2022 & look out for one we're involved in the launch of on 6<sup>th</sup> January.

So my last words are of thanks to each & every one of you, whether you follow us on Facebook, the website, Twitter, Instagram, or somewhere else.

Who knows what 2022 will bring, but what I do know is it'll be fun & this group will remain the positive, caring, supportive, family & safe environment that each of you helps to create.

Happy New Year &.....

Keeeeeep Walking 😊